

LIVING IN ONE'S HOME AS AN ACADIAN,
FRANCOPHONE OLDER WOMAN IN RURAL NEW
BRUNSWICK COMMUNITIES:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents the findings of research about the everyday lives of sixteen women aged between 75 and 93 who live in Francophone, rural communities in New Brunswick. The study addressed the question: How do Acadian, Francophone women, aged 75 years and older, who live in a rural, Francophone region of New Brunswick speak about their experiences of their everyday lives?

To deconstruct the negative discourse about older people that too often describes the aging population as a burden, this study adopted the posture of constructivism to better understand participants' lived experiences. Intersectionality provided an understanding of the intersection of being an older woman living in a rural Francophone area. Phenomenology proved to be a good way to tap into the lived experiences of these women.

The dissertation demonstrates that even though the participants live in a rural area, and, moreover, in a house in need of repairs, they do not see themselves as frail and destitute older women. In the interviews, they consistently defended their choice to remain in their rural community, because, often, there is someone to remind them that they are too old to stay where they choose to live. Although they understand that they might have to leave their home in the future, participants insisted that for now they are happy. This dissertation contributes to our understanding of how older Francophone rural women defend their lives from the insistence of others that they would be better off living elsewhere and the contradictions in their discussion that result. In addition, it introduces the concept of "underground support" that identifies support participants both give and receive that is likely invisible to others.

DEDICATION

To Annabelle, Ariane, Cloé, Janelle, Janie, Joanie, Josée, Geneviève, Marie-Claude, Marie-Line, Mylène, Natasha, Noémie, Valérie, Véronique and Zoé (fictitious first name). These 16 elderly women have warmly accepted to welcome me into their homes and share their rich life experience. These were moments of great discovery for me. Above all, these moments were filled with human warmth. THANK YOU!

I dedicate this thesis to two women who taught me a lot about life. To my mother Laura and if she were still alive today she would be 102 years old. To my mother-in-law Sylvia and if she lived she would be 95 years old. These women taught me about their life experience.

À Annabelle, Ariane, Cloé, Janelle, Janie, Joanie, Josée, Geneviève, Marie-Claude, Marie-Line, Mylène, Natasha, Noémie, Valérie, Véronique et Zoé (prénom fictif). Ces 16 femmes âgées ont chaleureusement accepté de m'accueillir chez elles et de partager leur riche expérience de vie. Ce furent des moments de grande découverte pour moi. Par-dessus tout, ces moments ont été remplis de chaleur humaine. MERCI !

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The topic of this dissertation is the lived experience of Acadian, Francophone women aged 75 years and older living independently in rural communities. Almost every day aging is present either in the public sphere or in the minds of the people who talk and write about it. Discussions about aging exist in many fields such as political science, economics, social work and health sciences. For the most part, fields such as economics and health sciences frame aging as a major factor in governments' financial strains. According to these perspectives, the aging population takes an enormous toll on healthcare, the economy and public finances. This discourse on aging is not unique to New Brunswick; it is present throughout Canada and on the international scene as well.

As will be explained further, the aging population makes up a significant part of the total population in New Brunswick, as in other Canadian provinces. Many studies highlight the social dimensions of aging and the supposed burden of an aging population. However, this qualitative study focuses on the lived experiences of individuals directly concerned by this alarmist discourse on aging: Acadian, Francophone women aged 75 years and older living in rural regions of New Brunswick.

1.1 The Importance of This Research

It is rare to read research that has examined the daily lives of older Acadian, Francophone women in rural communities. Although there are researchers who have concentrated their efforts on studying aging among Francophones in New Brunswick, there are currently no studies that focus specifically on older women (75 years and older) and their day-to-day lives in rural settings. While qualitative research does exist about aging Francophone populations in a minority language context in New Brunswick,

these studies tend to address their needs as a minority group of older people living in rural communities.

For instance, Simard, Dupuis-Blanchard, Villalon and Gould (2015) aimed to understand the challenges and the advantages for older Francophone individuals who remained in their house with home support in the rural Francophone region of Acadieville in New Brunswick. Another study conducted in St-Isidore, New Brunswick by Simard and Dupuis-Blanchard (2013) focused on the needs of the older Francophone population who lived in this rural community, and the services that helped them stay at home. Their study identified that there were older Francophones who were not bilingual and who did not have the same access to health services. This finding is important and needs to be explored further. A third study conducted across Canada wanted to know how the aging population living as a linguistic minority group experienced living at home and the issues and challenges they faced (Dupuis-Blanchard, Villalon & Alimezelli, 2014).

These three studies highlight the importance of research in rural regions and their Francophone population, particularly older individuals who remain in rural communities in New Brunswick. Overall, however, studies on older Francophone populations as a minority group remain relatively rare (Forgues, Gaucher, Guignard Noël, Kabano & Michaud, 2012).

There is also the important work on seniors by a panel appointed by the Premier of New Brunswick in 2012. The panel's report, entitled *Living Healthy, Aging Well* (2012), contained a wide range of recommendations, but few addressed the specific needs of rural communities and, in particular, the lived experiences of women aged 75 years and older. While the report briefly mentioned the idea of culture, it included nothing

regarding the importance of language in the lives of this aging population, and contained no recommendations regarding the linguistic needs of these communities. It is crucial that Francophones and Acadians who are older and who live in rural communities share their lived experiences and the significance of remaining in their communities, in order that their needs can be better understood.

Moreover, this qualitative study is based on the epistemological posture of phenomenology. The women interviewed in this thesis live in an area where French is the language of the majority, even though they are a minority group when compared to the total population of New Brunswick. This group has not been well represented in studies, especially when it comes to their lived experiences.

The present study proposes a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of older Acadian, Francophone women living in rural communities in New Brunswick. How do they experience their daily lives? What are the significant experiences in their daily lives? Answers to these questions will contribute to research on older Acadian, Francophone women and will help enrich the field of research on rural communities. This is important because New Brunswick is mainly composed of rural regions, and the aging population lives mostly in rural settings (Turcotte & Schellenberg, 2006). With these aims in mind, a qualitative approach appears necessary to better understand their experiences and to amplify the voice of older Acadian, Francophone women who live in rural communities who are seldom heard. Creswell (2013) pointed out that qualitative research is used "... because a problem or issue needs to be *explored*. This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that cannot be easily measured, or hear silenced voices" (p. 48).

First, the choice to study this demographic group stems from the interest I have developed during my career working with older women, from my university studies, and through my work in community development. I value older people for all the knowledge and wisdom that they have gained throughout their lives.

Second, the media and society at large tend to ignore or avoid older people. Rarely do we read an article or see a news segment that depicts their life or presents what they have to say as a topic of interest. Oftentimes, reports on the aging population focus solely on medical or health issues. Their lives must be studied in terms of their entire lived experience because those experiences consist of more than medical issues. While the emphasis in research has mainly been on medical needs and health issues (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006; Clément, Rolland, & Thoer-Fabre, 2007; Holstein, 2006; Sontag, 1972), and quantitative studies (Carney, 2018), their lives are also composed of a variety of other experiences. This study therefore explores some of these lived experiences. As Holstein and Gubrium (2007) explained, all aspects of daily life are taken into consideration, not only health issues or needs regarding care, for instance, but also other aspects that are important for older people themselves in all "... stages of life" (337).

The media perpetuates a specific view of the lived experiences of older women, typically describing their day-to-day lives as follows: *She is doing well **for her age**; she lives by herself **despite her old age**; she is **alert for her age**; she still has a good sense of **humour for her age**.* According to Terrill and Gullifer (2010), the media frequently depicts age negatively, i.e., as a limitation or a disadvantage, when they portray older women. Furthermore, these authors use the term "disjuncture" (p. 708) to reflect the distance that emerges between the literature on aging and women and their depictions in the media. This disjuncture is present in the media and reflected in people's minds when

they talk about and describe women's lived experiences. These words are harmful to older women, specifically women who do not necessarily correspond to these descriptions.

Friedan (1993) found that the voices of women aged 65 years and older were completely absent in the media which rendered them invisible in society. As an example, she stated that older women were almost never chosen as spokeswomen for products, and very few products were marketed towards them. In some print magazines such as *Vogue* or *Vanity Fair* where the readership is constituted of women, Friedan (1993) observed that when images of older women were present, it was in the context of a young woman presenting her "granny" (p. 37). The readers, therefore, were constantly presented with the image of a grandmother who was still physically active and fashionable. Therefore, the presence of older women in these magazines was dependent on the positive description of a younger woman, and the image of an unfashionable non-active grandmother was clearly not a possibility. Thus older women could seldom appear "by themselves", and a specific vision of old age was depicted in the media. This relative absence of grandmother figures could be explained by a certain fear of aging present at that time. Even today, these media representations still perpetuate negative images and stereotypes about older women as "old grannies" (Cracium & Flick, 2016; Oró-Piqueras, 2014; Wada, Clarke & Rozanova, 2015).

Butler (1975) also explored the media's role in the construction of a certain image of older people. Even in the 1960s, the media was not generous when depicting aging individuals. Many newspapers from that time illustrated negative attitudes about people in their seventies, stating, for example, that they should not be allowed to vote because they were at another stage of their life (Butler, 1975, p. 12). Such statements can

certainly influence how people perceive and treat older people. These observations and analyses of negative attitudes toward older people as a group convinced me to conduct a study of aging. I wanted to learn more about older people and their realities with regard to aging in society today, with a particular focus on what life is like for an Acadian, Francophone women aged 75 years and older living in rural regions.

The literature shows that there seems to be only one socially acceptable way to age. For instance, Cruikshank (2003) found that an older person who was still very active would be applauded by many people compared to an older person who was not as active. Rozanova's (2010) findings about the media's portrayal of older people demonstrated that the older person who is shown to be active, productive and socially engaged is a prototype of the way society wants people to age. Otherwise, they will be perceived as frail and not useful to society or, put bluntly, as a burden. Reports about the daily lives of older women continue to portray them more often negatively.

Praeger, Kohlbacher, Hagiwara and Arima (2011) also obtained the same results in their study of representations of older women in advertisements. These authors showed that older women are less frequently depicted in advertisements and that often, if they are present, it is only for a very short time. These authors even found that it is common for these women to remain silent during advertising. Thus, not only are older women under-represented in the media, but when they are present, they are depicted negatively. It goes without saying that these images have influenced studies on aging (Calasanti & King, 2018).

It is important to be able to talk to women themselves to learn about their own interpretations of living as older women instead of relying on negative images and stereotypes that are present in society. Doing so challenges negative representations of

aging. This is what motivated me to conduct such a study. It will also help to better understand that there is a variety of experiences in the process of aging and being a person of old age. Aging is not a universal experience. The definition of the word universal is that no matter who we are the experience is the same for all, that is to say, it “extends to all individuals” (Petit Robert, 2011 p. 2659 free translation). Too often, the experience of aging is described as being the same for everyone. It is studied as if the aging population is a homogenous group, for instance, a group of older people who all experience difficulties and health problems in later life (e.g, being frail) (Carney, 2018; Krekula, 2007).

Qualitative studies can add to the knowledge in the field of aging. Indeed, there is a critical need for research concerning older people, particularly women aged 75 years and older. As Ross-Sheriff explained (2008):

There are a significant number of demographic studies on elderly women that provide statistics on numbers, longevity, and trends. That work needs to be further elaborated with qualitative research that describes and explains the complex social experience of aging through narratives and life histories.
(p. 310)

This is true, as general observations or comments made about aging can often influence how people age and perceive aging. As Ross-Sheriff (2008) stated, studies need to delve deeper into the lived experiences of aging.

It is also important to explain why women were chosen as the target group to participate in this study. Women experience their lives differently than men at all stages of life. Research focussing on women clearly demonstrates that it is important to consider the specifics of older women’s life experiences, particularly as wives and mothers, as these experiences can define who they are today. Authors such as Chapman and Peace (2008), Dorfman, Méndez and Osterhaus, (2009) and Leith (2006)

demonstrated that studying aging in terms of gender contributes to a better understanding of the subjects' daily lives. These studies also highlight specific experiences recounted by women, such as the importance of their home and how different their needs are compared to those of older men. According to various researchers, three aspects must be considered when studying aging. First, according to Statistics Canada (2016), women live longer than men. Second, women account for the majority of people of an advanced age (Aronson, 2002; Gee & Kimball, 1987; Milan & Vézina, 2011); and third, aging is feminized (Charpentier & Billette, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2016). These are the reasons why this study adopts a gendered lens to explore the lives of older women in a rural setting.

I use rurality as one component to explore the lived experiences of the participants in this study. Rural regions are characterized by an aging population who are facing many challenges, including a lack of services, closures of some institutions (churches and schools), and the exodus of younger people towards urban regions (McDonough & Davitt, 2011; Ryser & Halseth, 2011). More information will be provided in the demographic section of this study to better understand the reality in rural regions. Although there are few social studies that specifically explore aging in rural communities, those which have studied aging “ha[ve] been largely limited to a sample of *farming* women” (Terrill & Gullifer, 2010, p.709). This is understandable, as farm work constituted a large part of women's work in rural regions. Thus, it is essential to learn about the experiences of older women living in rural regions, as this provides a new element and enriches social research on aging.

According to Harper (2019), context is essential when exploring aging. It is experienced differently in a society where older people make up the majority than in a society where the majority is young. It is therefore undeniable that we must focus on studying aging from the perspective of older women, because in the context of New Brunswick, they live in a predominantly older society. This trend is amplified in rural settings, especially those in Francophone areas of New Brunswick, where younger people are moving into urban settings while the older ones stay in their rural communities (Forgues et al., 2012; Simard, 2019).

However, “... research on rural families, social networks, support, and care remains a relatively small body of work in comparison to other research areas such as health” (Keating, Swindle & Fletcher, 2011, p.329), thus, other aspects of the lives of older people in rural communities must be studied to gain a global understanding of life in this context. For example, some studies have explored home care, the importance of remaining in one’s home, and the linguistic needs of older populations (Dupuis-Blanchard et al., 2014; 2015). Nevertheless, there is still room for qualitative studies in the field of aging and specifically research concerning older Francophone women who live in rural regions. As mentioned by Keating, Swindle and Fletcher (2011), “Aging of the rural countryside had not yet gained the attention of gerontologists, and there [is] little research on many topics relevant to aging in rural settings, as well as little theoretical development” (p. 324). This study will add to the field of research by exploring other facets of the lives of older people beyond their health and the challenges they may face, and further, by exploring the lived experience of Acadian, Francophone older women. As indicated by Keating, Swindle and Fletcher (2011), studies conducted

in rural areas are much needed if researchers hope to better understand this population's reality with regard to their language, culture, and the environment where they live.

Therefore, this study can contribute to research by adding new data and bringing new knowledge pertaining to older Acadian, Francophone women living in rural communities in New Brunswick. This study fills a gap with regard to current knowledge by focusing on three dimensions: aging, women, and rurality.

In the following section, I will present the socio-demographic background of this study. I will begin with a broad look at the aging population in Canada, followed by an exploration of the older Francophone population of women in Canada and in New Brunswick, and more specifically Kent County. I will address the importance of considering rural regions when studying aging in New Brunswick and, at the end of this section, present the research question and the objectives that guided this research.

1.2 A Socio-Demographic Profile of the Aging Population

According to various sources (Butler, 1975; *Organisation de coopération et de développement économique* [OCDE], 2018; Turcotte & Schellenberg, 2006), old people consist of those who are aged 65 years and older. However, for this study, the expression older women refers to those aged 75 years and older.

I made the choice to conduct this study with women aged 75 years and older mainly because women in this age group are less visible within society. Their voice is not often heard with regard to issues concerning their lives, and they are often looked at, according to Krekula (2007), "... from a misery perspective" (p. 160). Krekula (2007) also observed that women who are older than 75 years of age are rarely mentioned in a positive way in many studies about aging. Kinsel (2006) found that they are described as frail, sick and dependent individuals who need many health services. Krekula (2007)

went further by saying that despite studies about older women, their “... position has not been sufficiently problematized” (p. 159), meaning their position as older women. Age and gender have not been studied enough. For too long, older women have been studied with regard to aging (i.e., growing old) ignoring gender (i.e., their experiences as women). As Carney (2018) reminded us, longevity for older women means that many will live up to 100 years of age. Hence, this age group constitutes an important segment of older women that needs to be included in further research. Carney (2018) stated that studies must focus on aging to deconstruct negative images concerning older women. There are not many studies about Francophone women aged 75 and older who live in rural regions. This study will shed light on their lived experience.

1.2.1 The Situation in Canada

In Canada, the aging population is increasing and will continue to do so at a fast rate (Statistics Canada, 2016). By 2036, this group will represent 23% to 28% of the entire Canadian population. Moreover, according to Statistics Canada (2016), the population aged 85 years and older currently represents 2.2% of the total population. This is a significant segment—as much as 13%—of the Canadian population aged 65 years and older. People over 85 years of age are a growing population in Canada. Among the aging, women form the majority (Statistics Canada, 2016), as 54% of people aged 65 years and older are women. They represent 65% of people aged 85 years and older, and their proportion is even higher among those aged 100 years and older. Women represent 88% of that population. Currently, the aging population (aged 65 years and older) of New Brunswick represents 19.9% of the entire population of the province compared to 16.9% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2016).

1.2.2 In New Brunswick

Overall, the population of New Brunswick is 747 101, within which Francophones and Acadians account for 237 578 people (31.8%). It is worth noting that New Brunswick is the Canadian province with the highest percentage of people aged 65 years and older (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Along linguistic lines, older Acadians and Francophones in New Brunswick represent 21.5% of the population aged 65 and over whereas, Anglophones aged 65 and over account for 18.3% of the same population (Statistics Canada, 2017a).

In New Brunswick, by 2036, the population of older women will not only increase but in addition their life expectancy is expected to reach 88 years or older, while the life expectancy of men will reach 84.9 years (Statistics Canada, 2016).

A related fact to consider is that the Acadian and Francophone populations not only have a higher proportion of aged people, but that most live in rural settings. A study conducted by a research team at the Université de Moncton found that the aging population tends to grow faster in rural settings than in urban settings (Forgues et al., 2012). It is true that the aging population is more likely to live in rural regions in New Brunswick while the younger population tends to choose urban areas (Forgues et al., 2012). This explains why some rural areas are largely composed of older people. Forgues et al. (2012) mentioned in their study that Francophone communities are aging more rapidly than Anglophone communities in rural areas.

Most Francophones in rural settings live in the northern and northwestern parts of New Brunswick. A segment of that population lives along the coast of the province and is primarily located in six counties: Madawaska, Victoria, Gloucester, Restigouche, Kent, and Northumberland. Acadians and Francophones represent more than 90% of the

population in these regions (Lepage, Bouchard-Coulombe & Chavez, 2011). The total population of New Brunswick aged 75 years and older amounts to 47,135 people, out of which 9,725 are Francophone women (Statistics Canada, 2017).

1.2.3 In Kent County

Kent County is located relatively far from urban centres, the closest of which is 100 km away. Kent County has a population of 30,475 inhabitants (Statistics Canada, 2017), and its territory is composed of five municipalities with populations ranging from 1,500 to 2,300 people. However, the communities that participated in this research had smaller populations. For example, one community comprised only 856 persons. It is of interest to note that most of the population in the region of Kent is Francophone and Acadian (73%) (Statistics Canada, 2017) as described in Table 1:

Table 1: Statistical Profile

Canada	New Brunswick	Kent County	Percentage
Total population 36 708 083	Total population 747 100	Total population 30 475	4.1% total population for N.B. lives in Kent County
75 years and older 2 059 540	75 years and older 49 255	75 years and older 2195	4.4 % population 75 years and older in N.B. live in Kent County
Francophone women 75 years and older 292 730	Francophone women 75 years and older 9725	Francophone women aged 75 years and older 975	10% Francophone women aged 75 years and older in N.B. live in Kent County

An interesting aspect of this region is that the aging Acadian, Francophone population in Kent makes up 18% of Kent County (all people aged 65 and older) (Statistics Canada, 2017). Kent County has been chosen for this study because it is an ideal site that includes the three components of this research. First, the rural regions are almost entirely Francophone; second, women compose most of the aging population; and third, all the communities are far away from public services. Certainly, there are not many qualitative

studies about older Acadian, Francophone women from Kent County. This research constitutes an addition to studies about older Acadian, Francophone women.

1.3 Research Question and its Objectives

This study aimed to understand and learn from the reality and lived experiences of older women living in a rural context. The research question is as follows: How do Acadian, Francophone women, aged 75 years and older, who live in a rural, Francophone region of New Brunswick speak about their experiences? The objectives are to: 1) grasp the everyday reality of these older women; 2) understand the factors that allow them to stay in rural areas; and 3) learn what it means to live in a rural region as an older woman. This research question and its objectives have allowed for a better understanding and interpretation of the lived experiences of these women.

1.4 Summary of the Chapter

First, this chapter illustrated the importance of undertaking a qualitative study of Acadian, Francophone older women, aged 75 years and older, who live in rural communities in New Brunswick. Some scholars have stressed the urgency to study this subject from the perspectives of women and of rurality. Of special interest are women aged 75 and over, because they represent a significant portion of elderly groups, both nationally and provincially, and yet, they have been under-researched to date. More specifically, there is a lack of studies about older women living in rural areas who can report on their experiences of being old and being a woman. Second, a sociodemographic profile of the aging population in Canada and in New Brunswick showed that women represent a significant proportion of the aging population. This section was followed by the research question and objectives for this study.

1.5 Presentation of the Thesis

In chapter 2, I present the theoretical perspective that informed this research as well as details of the qualitative studies that have provided insights into aging. With regard to the framework, I used social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Groenewald, 2004; van Manen, 1990) to help explain how aging has been socially constructed and adopted by people and by society at large. This theoretical perspective has helped to better depict what it means to live as an older woman. I also used an intersectional feminist analysis because still today women continue to be oppressed or excluded in various manners on the basis of their gender. However, it is important to take into account the interlocking dimensions of gender, age and rurality when exploring the experience of Acadian, Francophone older women.

Chapter 3 contains a review of the literature about ageism, older women, and rurality from a qualitative perspective, which will help to better explain how aging has been constructed throughout society. The field of gerontology, combined with a feminist lens, helped to better understand the different areas of oppression that older people experience when they live in rural areas. This chapter ends with a section explaining the need for future research about Acadian, Francophone women aged 75 years and older who live in rural regions.

Chapter 4 addresses the methodological considerations of this study. First, I will explain how I used phenomenology, and more specifically the hermeneutic approach (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), to conduct this study. Second, I will describe the recruitment methods, the data collection process and the data analysis. This section of the chapter also includes the ethical considerations with regard to this research conducted with older women living in rural regions of New Brunswick.

In chapter 5, I present the results, which comprise the lived experiences of older women who took part in the study. The chapter begins with two short stories to introduce the women I interviewed. This chapter contains four sections, each one exploring a different aspect of these women's lives: living in their own home, living independently, living in a rural community, and living at the intersection of gender, age and rurality.

Chapter 6 includes a discussion about the lived experience of these women. The discussion explores the notions of living independently, the advantages of staying in one's home, and the quality of life related to living in a rural region as an older woman. This chapter will delve into the contradictions and tensions present in participants' accounts of their daily experiences. On the one hand, all of the participants indicated the positive side of being older women in rural regions. They wish to remain in their rural region as long as they can, even if some days are more difficult than others. On the other hand, they also expressed how difficult it is to stay in that same environment. This section is followed by the implications for research and practice regarding Acadian, Francophone older women living in a rural setting. The chapter concludes with the limitations of this study.

In conclusion, I highlight how stereotypes reinforce the negative image of older women who live at home by themselves in rural regions. This research is unique, as it aims to understand three interrelated phenomena: being an Acadian, Francophone woman, being older, and living in a rural setting in New Brunswick informed by a phenomenological methodology.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This study uses social constructivism along with a feminist perspective as its theoretical framework. According to Creswell (2013), social constructivism aims to understand the participants' point of view, the experiences women have lived throughout their life, their culture, and any aspects that surround them and influences their perceptions and beliefs. Social constructivism allows for a deeper understanding and contextualization of social reality, which gives individuals a sense of self.

I chose a feminist perspective because of its commitment to challenge any form of prejudice towards women. For too long, women have experienced multiple forms of discrimination simply because of their gender. Feminist studies fight for women's liberation, since they experience discrimination in every aspect of their lives. More precisely, some groups of women had limited choices about childbearing (e.g., the number of children) and saw their bodily autonomy and career choices severely restricted. While some forms of discrimination were eventually addressed, such as the right to vote, older women still face prejudice today because they are women and they are aging, as I will explore later in this thesis. An intersectional approach (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016) was used to analyze the lived experiences of women. This approach raises awareness of the importance of gender as well as other interlocking social and contextual dimensions such as age and rurality.

2.1 Social Constructivism

Social constructivism is interested in the ways in which people define and see themselves within a given society. To define their reality, people rely on definitions that others apply to them. According to Cooley (1902), "... we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character ... are variously

affected by it” (p. 152). Cooley named this social construction the “looking-glass self” (p. 152), which illustrates society’s role in modulating everyday life. For instance, it is through public discourse and social perceptions that people tend to define themselves as a group and as individuals. It is not uncommon for a person who hears negative social messages about her age on a daily basis to state that she is “too old” to try a new hobby or to change jobs, for example, because she has internalized societal messages about what it means to be old. In other words, people construct their world with these references in mind in order to be included in the world that surrounds them (Kim, 2001; Young & Collin, 2004).

By adopting these definitions about themselves, individuals become not only objects of their environment, but also active subjects of their lives (Caillouette, 1997), who adopt and act according to socially constructed descriptions that concern them. Furthermore, this allows the dominant group to impose its “dominant cultural values” (Cruikshank, 2003, p. 23) and to subjugate subordinate groups who may be marginalized if they do not adhere to these values. Therefore, the subordinate group must conform to the dominant culture and respect its values.

Social constructivism also encourages the description and analysis of people’s everyday lives from their own perspectives. This subjectivity emerges from people’s interactions with others. Schütz (1899-1959) extensively studied and deepened the paradigm of social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Groenewald, 2004; van Manen, 1990). His analysis is based on assumptions regarding reality, knowledge and learning, which allowed him to clarify his thoughts on the social construction of reality (Kim, 2001).

In the world of social constructivism, for instance, reality exists only through social activities, when individuals interact with one another. Social interactions with others allow us to gain access to individual definitions of a phenomenon, and the analysis of social construction must also take into account the environment and culture specific to the members of this group.

Similarly, knowledge comes from interactions with others, as interactions constitute the basis of reality. Knowledge is produced “when individuals are engaged in social activities” (Kim, 2014, p. 3). In other words, individuals need interactions to be able to learn and understand what people around them think of their experiences as a community. Continual interactions make it possible to construct one’s reality, to know who one is as an individual, and to learn to interpret one’s reality. These interactions allow one to communicate and to understand new experiences as an individual and as a member of the group. Thus, the social construction of reality takes form within the group and its interactions.

According to Schütz (1899–1959), people base their reality on the knowledge they acquire through the relationships they develop during their life, and thus construct their reality based on those interactions with others (Kim, 2001; Young & Collin, 2004). Individuals live their daily lives according to the way others define them (Caillouette, 1997). Lavery (2003) supported this analysis of social reality by claiming that “meaning is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our own background and experiences” (p. 24). Schütz (1899-1959) helped to explain the reality of human beings as socially constructed through their daily lives, that is, through their surroundings and what makes them human: history, culture, language and environment (Lavery, 2003).

This explains why Schütz believed that a person's choices about how they should live are influenced by the individuals who surround them. While older people may know what they want for themselves, people who surround them tell them how to live their daily life because, more often than not, others tend to define the everyday reality of people. Some groups of people may believe themselves to be experts who know what is best for others (Schütz, 1899–1959, p. 37). Furthermore, Schütz emphasized that humans live in a social world that surrounds and defines them, but they also define themselves in relation to this world (Schütz, 1899–1959). In the same fashion, Mills (1959) explained that people are surrounded by individuals—friends, family, neighbours, etc.—who shape their daily lives or define who they are (p. 3). Hence, the more people act according to expectations that others have for them, the more they will act according to these expectations (p. 3). It is the influence of others that determines how people act in their daily lives.

However, it is important to understand that everyone lives their own reality differently depending on their personal context. For instance, Schütz (1899–1959) argued that someone who is 60 years old and has lived through a war or another significant event in history cannot be said to have led the same life or had the same experiences as someone who is 20 years old, who never experienced a war and lives in today's America. Schütz explained that in this case, neither their life nor their descriptions of events are alike, even though they both live in the same social world. Studying lived experience leads to greater insights about how people's lives are constructed and allows a deeper understanding of their daily lives.

Clearly, then, a woman is not alone in her daily life, because she lives with others in society when she experiences events that influenced her life. The world around her

has defined the social roles she must take if she wants to be considered as part of society. These roles consist of being a mother, a wife, a family member, a group member, and an employee in her workplace. These different roles all influence how a woman constructs her daily life and define who she is (Young & Collins, 2004). This is what Mills (1959) calls “social standards” (p. 29), and according to these, individuals all act to some extent according to these standards.

Knowing how people socially construct their reality allows us to understand how social discourse influences them. A social discourse is a powerful characterization made about a group by many people who believe that their opinion concerning that group is the reality. Van Dijk (2006) described the social discourse as a set of ideas present in society that builds a “belief system” (p. 116) which defines certain groups. Such belief systems “... are *socially shared* by the members of a collectivity of social actors” (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 116). Individuals construct their daily reality based on the social discourse constructed by others. This socially constructed definition follows individuals throughout their lives.

Following Schütz, Berger and Luckmann (1966) explained in their seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality*, that our knowledge is built upon daily experiences that every human has by forming relationships with others (p. 33). Lived experiences of individuals are shaped through relationships with others and the way others perceive them. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), it was Schütz himself who made this proposition.

Descriptions of daily life influence the way people perceive themselves and the way they act. Furthermore, it is important to note that people often try to act in a way they believe others wish to see them. These others, the majority group, decide the norms

by implementing policies, providing public services as well as making decisions that dictate how a given group should think and act. People interpret their own realities, but it is the dominant group that built these realities. They act according to these realities in their daily lives, and this can be taken for granted (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 3). According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), the interpretation of reality happens through phenomenology, which is an epistemological and theoretical stance that is closely related to social constructivism. As these authors suggest, the descriptive nature of phenomenology allows a deeper understanding of the social construction of people's lives. Phenomenology will be described in detail in the methodology section.

The social construction of reality provides a solid foundation for understanding reality. Authors such as Berger and Luckmann (1966), Kim (2001) and Lavery (2003), clearly demonstrated the influence of the construction of reality on one's daily life, which helps to explain how groups interpret a discourse about themselves and act to be socially accepted. A feminist perspective has also contributed to a better understanding of how dominant discourses maintain social inequalities. This perspective, based on an intersectional approach (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016) combined with a social constructionist perspective, provides a detailed consideration of oppressed and marginalized groups and their interpretation of the meaning of their lived experiences. This is presented below.

2.2 Feminist Perspective

A feminist perspective is crucial in denouncing the discrimination and oppression of minority groups. Older women do not escape the influence of social discourse with regard to the place women should take in society, as they possess a lived experience of the social construction of gender in their daily life. Therefore, the era in which they were

born, and the realities of that time determine their place and their work in society, as well as the demarcation between the private sphere and the public sphere. Hence, the primacy of the domestic sphere must be considered for this generation of older women because of the gendered division of work (Siltanen & Doucet, 2008). Furthermore, an intersectional feminist analysis contributes to a better understanding of the influence of gender, age, and rurality to better get a sense of how older women living in a rural setting interpret their lives.

2.2.1 Intersectional Approach

In this thesis, an intersectional approach helped to illustrate the different facets of the group being studied. This approach recognizes that multiple dimensions such as gender, race, and class must be analyzed simultaneously to shed light on the lived experiences of older women living in a rural setting. Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) explained that individuals "... generally use intersectionality as an analytic tool to solve problems that they or others around them face" (p. 2). Krekula (2007) explained that intersectionality emphasizes the fact that gender cannot be studied without including important dimensions that contribute to women's experiences.

With regard to studying older women, age needs to be problematized the same way gender has been addressed in women's studies (Calasanti & King, 2018). For instance, the aging body has been studied more in terms of gender than as the study of aging in and of itself, i.e., how women perceive aging and how they feel as older women (Calasanti & King, 2018). Krekula (2007) went further by saying: "Within the gender theoretical sphere, older women have tended to be left out, and age and aging are seldom addressed" (p. 155). She referred to gender theory as one that did not include age in its intersections, adding: "In gender theory, the intersectionality approach has not been

applied to the interplay between age and gender ...” (p. 163). While this was the case for a long time, she acknowledges that more recently, studies are increasingly intersecting age and gender (Krekula, 2007). Another dimension that needs to be added in this study is rurality.

Chapman and Peace (2008) clearly stated that “[t]hroughout our lives the places in which we live reflect aspects of self”, and these places must therefore be taken into account (p. 21). Furthermore, Keating and Phillips (2008) mentioned that living longer is a diverse experience in different contexts, such as living in a rural setting (p. 1). Studying older women’s experiences with an intersectional lens provides a better understanding of their experiences in a rural context.

The intersectional approach used in this study considers the intersection of gender, age, and rurality and aims to better capture the experiences of older women living in rural areas and the ways in which they perceive and describe themselves. The following sections will explore these dimensions of intersectionality.

2.2.2 The Concept of Gender

Social construction is forged by the influence that the environment has on people, and older women do not escape this dynamic. It is therefore important to focus on gender in this study, as women aged 75 and over have experienced life differently in part not only because they are women, but also because they are *aging* women.

The concept of gender refers to a set of beliefs and definitions that create differences between men and women and dictate how to act specifically according to gender. In our society, this set of beliefs can result in discrimination and inequities for women during their lifetime (Browne, 1998; Clarke, 2011; Shenk, 1998). According to Siltanen and Doucet (2008), gender is an ideology constructed through the different

lived experiences of women and men, who see “gender ideologies ... as a taken-for-granted set of social beliefs about men’s and women’s roles and relationships in both private and public spheres” (Siltanen & Doucet, 2008, p. 117). Social norms in these spheres have influenced the positions available to women in society.

That same society, formed by families, government and members of a community, understands domestic work as being the main responsibility of women. However, society does not see the domestic sphere as a workplace *per se*, but instead as the “natural” place for a woman to be. Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Siltanen and Doucet (2008) described day-to-day realities such as this example as “taken for granted”. Therefore, it is important to deconstruct these social constructions of reality by identifying how gender ideologies colour the lived experiences (Siltanen & Doucet, 2008, p. 117) of women, particularly as wives and mothers. These ideologies ensure a clear distinction between the roles played by women and men.

To further probe the concept of gender, authors such as Browne (1998), Clarke (2011), Furman (1997), Grenier and Hanley (2007), Leith (2006) and Terrill and Gullifer (2010), explained that gender occupies different positions in public, social and cultural spheres. This is especially true for older women, as they often encounter limited alternatives in the public sphere and, therefore, live most of their lives at home. Therefore, these women find it hard to leave the environment in which they are defined as wives, mothers and nurturers: in other words, these social definitions have become part of their identity (Terrill & Gullifer, 2010, p. 708).

In this regard, it is important to understand that older women born during the 1920s–1940s have experienced different realities than those of today. According to Luxton (1980), women’s main responsibility in that era was to have a family and spend

most of their daily life in their home. Thus, women of this generation developed their sense of self through the place where they spent most of their life, and constructed their identity as domestic caretakers (Luxton, 1980, p. 20). Women also described their identity by all their commitments in the community. Through a Marxist-feminist lens, Luxton (1980) explained that women's work in the home could very well constitute a form of labour in and of itself. Beyond housework, women were responsible for the "production" (p. 20) and the "subsistence of the family" (p. 20), ensuring that the home was a pleasant environment for their husbands, etc. However, women's day-to-day responsibilities and household chores were not recognized by society as "real" work. While women of this generation mostly did domestic work, some of them did work outside the home. However, when they became mothers, this new role became their full-time occupation.

George (2000) subscribed to Luxton's analysis of women's domestic work as unrecognized labour, stating that the concept of gender allows for an understanding of a woman's place in her community which the author calls a "cultural production" (p. 20). George (2000) indicated that this cultural production is based on socially constructed roles that women play in their communities and the place they occupy in the workforce. Women often accept social constructions assigned to them by the dominant patriarchal power in accordance with their gender. For George (2000), it is thus necessary to pay close attention to gender because it determines the roles that women play in their environment.

In the same vein, Neysmith (1995) clearly explained that a feminist perspective is crucial in interpreting the impact of social context on women's lives. For Neysmith (1995), "the position being argued here is that experience needs to be problematized

through the recognition that none of us escapes the social location within which we experience events” (p. 108). Since social and cultural norms guide women throughout their daily lives, it is important to employ a feminist perspective when researching older women. These women were discriminated against because of their gender, particularly during the time when they performed the (socially imposed) role of being a wife and a mother. Compared to contemporary young women, they had even fewer choices. Shenk (1998a), commenting on the lives of older rural women, argued the following:

Like many women of their generation, these women felt limited in their choices of careers and many of those who worked outside the home were teachers. They taught school for several years but generally only until they were married. The most common role for women was on the farm where there were clear divisions between “woman’s work” and “man’s work”. (p. 14)

Still, some women never got to work outside the home and receive compensation for their labour (Black & Rubinstein, 2000). This generation of women did not see that their domestic work could be considered a legitimate form of work. Instead, they saw it as their primary role and duty as a woman. For some women, it would have been inconceivable to enter the workforce because their role was to take care of their family. Perhaps many did not think they had enough experience to enter the workplace or possess enough knowledge and abilities to do so.

Hence, domestic labour was not a true job for them, and the educational opportunities for women were often limited. In fact, many women at that time were discouraged from pursuing their studies (Black & Rubinstein, 2000; Furman, 1997). When older women were present in the workforce, most of them would leave their paid job after getting married to enter the domestic sphere to become housewives and mothers (Shenk, 1998b).

These experiences have undoubtedly contributed to the way older women saw their roles of mother and wife in a highly patriarchal system. The social meaning of women's work infused all levels of society, and, as Siltanen and Doucet (2008) claimed, this unpaid work was "largely invisible and unnoticed" (p. 109). Society had drawn rigid lines to demarcate gendered roles, and these roles became internalized (Black & Rubinstein, 2000, p. 63).

Authors including Leith (2006), Milan and Vézina (2011) and Stark-Wroblewski, Edelbaum, and Bello (2008) also highlighted such gender roles. With a clear division of labour and roles for men and women, some women reached old age without seeing themselves as anything other than wives and homemakers, leaving them with few alternatives outside those roles. These women were invisible because they fulfilled their role in the private sphere where there was no social recognition for what they did. Their role ended with the departure of children from the home when these women were then perceived as inactive within the family.

The expected roles of the couple determined the appropriate place for women and men because their place was clearly defined within marriage (Shenk, 1998a) and for women, this place was inside the home. In that sense, women aged 75 years and older developed the ability to assume responsibilities inside the home, and the fact that they remained proficient at them may have contributed to their capacity to remain independent, allowing them to feel valued. Older women often continue to perform these social roles and to maintain their sense of self. These women were often recognized within the family and valued for their roles, which validated their accomplishments (MacRae, 1990). Even though society did not see older women as people who still had

the same responsibilities as before, they remained active in doing the same tasks they had been doing in the past.

The division of labour that old people experienced when they were young is present even today in their daily lives. While both men and women who remain active in their community or within their family are still unrecognized or valued for their contributions, women are devalued differently (Arber, Davidson & Ginn, 2003; Krekula, 2007). This is demonstrated by the lack of interest in women's need for assistance when they are older, as well as their not being seen as active members of society. In society, older women are often portrayed as being idle and not doing much with their time (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006; Terrill & Gullifer, 2010). Because the house is now empty, society sees these changes in the lives of older women as signifying that they are doing nothing with their days (Terrill & Gullifer, 2010), or are not socially engaged (Clarke, 2011). In addition, according to Clarke (2011), researchers' silence about aging only makes the lived experiences of older women even more unremarkable and invisible. Older women are confronted with a society that does not invest in them or even notice them. The domestic work they performed has been consistently unrecognized by policy makers and the public.

It is interesting to note that the government did not consider gender when developing policies around retirement. McDonald (2006) stated that retirement for women who had performed domestic work did not include concrete retirement plans, and men were eligible for retirement packages, but women who worked inside the home were not (McDonald, 2006). Women were essentially penalized because they had been the primary caregivers to their husband and family. Such discrimination against women

creates difficult material and financial conditions later in life (McDonald, 2006). Indeed, older women's financial difficulties are compounded by the fact that they live longer with only one household income. This results in older women's having to live with fewer financial resources (Leith, 2006). Being at home and growing old are unfortunately not valued in society because aging is socially associated with unproductiveness and inactivity.

Many older women who invested all their knowledge and abilities in the home are now living by themselves and growing old in their home. Many are aware that people in their immediate environment and in the larger society see them as lonely women who are simply waiting for their life to end. This is a popular depiction of older people living alone. The silence in society about such a portrayal has contributed to gender roles' being maintained within the cultural and social norms well entrenched in people's minds (Browne, 1998; Clarke 2011). It is undeniable that the concept of gender has had an influence in determining the position of older women in their environment. The study of gender has contributed to the awareness that older women form a group that is discriminated against simply on the basis of gender and old age. These social constructions of the reality of older women may have contributed to the lack of research regarding this population. This absence still contributes to their invisibility, and for many, their vulnerability and their poor living conditions.

2.2.3 Age: The Reality of Older Women

Feminists have used gender as a starting point, on the one hand, to analyze the construction of aging in the life of women and the reality of being an older woman and, on the other hand, to deconstruct definitions and negative images that have been imposed on women solely because of their gender. Negative definitions and images of

older women contribute to their devaluation. A feminist perspective is useful in bringing to light and denouncing these forms of discrimination against old women (Fisher, 2000; Neysmith, 1995; Reinhartz, 1992).

Some feminist authors, for example, Browne (1998) and Calasanti and Slevin (2006), claimed that feminist scholars have not specifically addressed aging when studying women's experiences. As Calasanti (2003) noted, they have addressed gender, race, class, power, domestic labour and many other issues, but have not spent much time examining aging. Calasanti, Slevin, and King (2006) noted that:

the number of women's studies scholars engaged in work in later life is still so small that those with any interest in aging can count them; the rest (probably the majority) may know their names (such as Woodward 1999; Gullette 2004; and Cruikshank 2003) but not their work. The issues go ignored by most scholars, and one must ask why. (p. 13)

Because of frequent negative descriptions of older women, some authors (Browne, 1998; Clarke 2011; Terrill & Gullifer, 2010) have noted the absence of research concerning older women. According to Brown (1998), "More recently, several feminists have extended this line of questioning to ask why society, and why feminists themselves have generally ignored the needs of aging women" (p. 249). Terril and Gullifer (2010) more recently commented, "Traditionally, older women have been neglected in aging research, with gerontology remaining genderless, and women's studies remaining ageless" (p. 708). Authors Marshall and Katz (2006) also recognized that the field of gerontology neglects the study of older women.

Friedan (1993) explained that during the feminist movement, aging was not a subject of studies because, she said, "we all felt young" (p. 16). This absence in the literature and lack of specificity regarding older women might have reflected their invisibility and lack of recognition in society. According to Perrig-Chiello and Darbellay

(2004), gender studies have been silent about older women even though this field typically aims to represent various realities of women. Moreover, according to Calasanti, Selvin and King (2006), some feminist scholars have studied older women, but very few studies pertain to the “Fourth Age” (p. 14), that is, beyond 85 years and older. For instance, a major movement emerged to promote aging well, which described aging as ageless, and an entire industry was built around anti-aging (cosmetics, leisure, etc.), which, of course, targeted people aged 55 and over. At the same time, people of old age and all issues of social inequality were put aside (Katz & Marshall, 2003).

Most of the studies on aging take the age of 65 years as the starting point, but few focus on people aged 85 years and older to learn about their lived experience. The term “fourth age” acknowledges the existence of individuals who live to and beyond 85 years of age (Higgs & Gilleard, 2014). As indicated earlier in this thesis, this age group is growing faster in numbers compared to the general population and they constitute an important group in society. Because ageism portrays older people negatively, it is necessary to study the lived experience of women aged 85 years and older. Women reaching the age of 75 years and older are easily forgotten and even set aside. Creating a category of women over 75 years of age bridges the gap between the “third” and “fourth” ages and provides insights into the experiences of women who are, in a way, forgotten or excluded because their age is synonymous with a greater decline (Grenier & Ferrer, 2010; Higgs & Gilleard, 2018) To fill this void, a feminist theory of aging has emerged in feminist gerontology (Calasanti, 2004).

Feminist gerontologists have determined that women’s lives are composed of specific needs and aspects that are unique to them because they are aged (Calasanti, 2003). Older women, according to Cracium and Flick (2016), experience

aging differently because of their gender. These authors continued by explaining that gender and aging affect older women who live with disparities because of their gender (Cracium & Flick, 2016) such as the financial challenges of living alone as an older woman. Hence, the social construction of gender influences how people see these women. The social construction of aging interacts with "... the social context to influence people's beliefs about aging" (p. 530). These beliefs have resulted in marginalizing the experiences of older people by focusing on the needs of younger ones (Carney, 2018). However, as stated by Harper (2016), there is a huge need to address the notion of aging "because it is universal".

It is worthwhile to take into consideration previous studies on women and aging to understand the aging phenomenon in general. Some qualitative studies conducted on aging have been useful in gaining a better understanding of the realities of the aging population. Almost all authors who have conducted qualitative studies on aging analyze ageism and its influence in a society that promotes productivity and the active contribution of its population. Morganroth Gullette (2004) explains how culture influences the place aging occupies in people's minds: "Age as a marker of difference between age classes is getting more salient in popular culture" (p. 23). It is not gender or race (p. 23) that draws the line when the time comes to categorize people within groups, rather, it is age that defines one's place and status within a group and within the culture at large.

2.2.4 Rurality

At the intersection of age and gender, there is also the notion of rurality. Rurality faces its own set of challenges, ranging from rural youths' exodus from the country to the city to the closure of services (Ryser & Halseth, 2011) and the homogeneity of the

rural population (namely, older people). When the time comes for older women to seek formal and informal support, this may prove to be difficult, as they must reinvent sources of help and support (Ryser & Halseth, 2011). In addition, they speak primarily French in the region of interest to this study. This is an important aspect of their environment and constitutes what Simard, Dupuis-Blanchard, and Villalon (2011) call the “sociolinguistic environment” (free translation p. 3). Furthermore, many rural regions are faced with challenges, such as a lack of services requiring them to go to cities to obtain services. These aspects cannot be neglected in our study of rural older women.

Studies used in this chapter have clearly demonstrated that the work of older women in the domestic sphere has not been recognized. This, therefore, contributes to women’s being represented as no longer having anything to contribute because of their age and as socially unproductive because their children have moved out of the house. Adding to that image of older women is the negative impression about living in rural communities. It has been documented that rural areas are neglected in favour of urban areas and in studies also (Chapman & Peace, 2008; Scharf & Bartlam, 2008). Rurality today is still described negatively due to the absence of services or closure of businesses, etc. The notion of aging has also been negatively perceived within society. Older women live at the crossroads of ageism and sexism and because they remain in rural communities, places where they live, do add another layer of discrimination towards them. They are described as isolated, alone and without resources in their rural areas.

2.3 Summary of the Chapter

In chapter 2, I presented the theoretical perspective chosen to understand social constructivism and how individuals define themselves through the world in which they live. I explained how the social construction of reality and an intersectional feminist analysis can better grasp the influence of gender on the experiences of older women living in rural settings. In this chapter, I also explained how gender, age, and rurality intersect to understand their influence on the lived experience of older women. The next chapter, devoted to a literature review on ageism, older women and rural life, will explore this social construction of the reality of older women living in rural areas.

CHAPTER 3: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The next pages present a review of the literature in the field of aging with regard to discrimination based on age, stereotypes and prejudices about older women, and the realities of living in rural settings. First, I explore the experience of discrimination against older people. Some authors, including Butler (1969) and Morganroth Gullette (2011) have extensively explored ageism and its negative impacts on their lives such as being perceived as a burden and a cost to society. This leads to a social construction of aging associated with unproductiveness, characterized by the image of older individuals “waiting for the end of their life”. Second, I provide an overview of studies that identify negative stereotypes and prejudices about older women in society that play a role in their group’s marginalization. Third, I analyze how rurality is framed in studies regarding older people living in rural settings. Some aspects of rural life that were studied include availability of services, the composition of the population and challenges of living in those regions.

Recent studies highlight how aging and ageism impact women more significantly than men, and that it is more difficult to live in an ageist society while being an old woman. Morganroth Gullette (2011) stated that ageism constitutes an ordinary part of the daily lives of older women. Ageism perpetuates assumptions about old women’s consistently needing help for their health and intertwines with sexism. For example, a healthcare professional could automatically attribute an old woman’s health concern to a symptom of old age (e.g., expressing concerns about physical pain in a leg), and some symptoms may be dismissed due to her gender (e.g., seen as fragile) (Carney, 2018; Clark, 2011; Cracium & Flick, 2016).

The studies selected demonstrate what it is like to be an older woman, how women live and plan their lives, their hopes, and their representations of their world. The literature review will also highlight the reality of older women in various settings. Some authors mention that rurality constitutes an element that must be considered when studying aging. Rurality, like aging, is defined negatively, and influences public opinions about people who live in rural settings (Chapman & Peace, 2008; Keating, 2008). When older women live in rural areas, they are more prone to be portrayed negatively. In this section, studies about three main topics will be presented: ageism, older women and rurality.

3.1 Ageism

Ageism is a powerful word whose meaning can be difficult to understand. Most of the authors who write about this topic agree that ageism is a form of discrimination against a specific age group of the population (Browne, 1998; Clarke, 2011; Cruikshank, 2003; Lagacé, 2010; Shenk, 1998a; Sontag, 1972).

3.1.1 Understanding the Word Ageism

Ageism is not only a form of discrimination against old people but also a daily occurring phenomenon that is often taken for granted and does significant harm to old people. Ageism is different from aging, as Copper (1988) explained:

Aging is a natural and universal personal experience which begins the day we are born. Ageism is the negative social response to different stages in the process of aging and is a political issue. (p. 73)

Ageism has been present in discussions about aging since the 1960s when Butler (1969) denounced the harm that it could cause among the aging population and even among the general population. Butler, who coined the term, (1969) expressed it as follows: “We may soon have to consider very seriously a form of bigotry we now tend to overlook:

age discrimination or age-ism...” (p. 243). Ageism is present within the system itself, the system which decides every policy and public service. This type of discrimination towards older people tends to be systemic rather than individual. Treating people differently based on age has created a fear of old people and all the elements associated with old age. Butler (1969) defined ageism in this way:

Age-ism describes the subjective experience implied in the popular notion of the generation gap. Prejudice of the middle-aged against the old in this instance, and against the young in others, is a serious national problem. Age-ism reflects a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged—a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, “uselessness”, and death. (p. 243)

Butler (1969) went even further by stating that the process of aging is totally ignored. He claimed, “Aging is the neglected stepchild of the human life cycle” (p. 1). Even now, ageism is present in representations of aging as an undesirable trait. This has led to disinterest on the part of both society and policy makers about the experience of aging. Despite the fact that aging is currently a topic of interest, this interest is not about understanding how an aging population is experiencing their life, but focuses on the high cost it represents for society. Older individuals are on the margins, and they are not seen as a part of daily life. Society looks at them as repulsive and from afar, but still thinks it knows what is in their best interest without paying attention or listening to their voices. Ageism, according to Butler (1969), has thus managed to be a source of grief for older people.

Morganroth Gullette (2011) saw ageism in a similar way. For her, ageism affects all spheres of life, whether social, cultural, health, public policies, or families: in one word, it is everywhere. Because of the fear of aging and of becoming old, it is not surprising that many older people do not want to continue to live (Morganroth Gullette,

2011). Morganroth Gullette (2011) explained that “ageism is waging undeclared wars against our enjoyment of our longer later life” (p. 23). Older people are constantly confronted by comments from those around them or by speeches from the government reminding them that all their problems are the result of their being old. For the author, it is urgent “to raise ageism consciousness” (p. 14), to deconstruct the ageist social construction of aging.

The lived experiences of older people can be explored by looking at the environment in which they live as well as the social and political discourses around aging. Old age is impacted by these aspects.

Author Morganroth Gullette (2011) explained how these aspects influence the social construction of aging: “Ageism is part of that construction of aging. I think of ageism as a learned set of beliefs and practices that prevent us from functioning in an optimal way in relation to aging” (Morganroth Gullette, 2011, p. 34). It is an interesting exercise to understand the impact that ageism has had, not only in the life of older people but in the imagination of all the people who fear aging. Ageism is ubiquitous, and it impacts the life of every citizen through social policies, the health-care system, the economy, and so on.

Authors such as Butler (1969) and Morganroth Gullette (2017) explained that ageism is systemic. As Morganroth Gullette (2017) stated, ageism is not only an aberration on the part of a group but an entire system that she calls “systemic vice” (p. 23). As a result, this system has succeeded in framing aging as an individual issue. It convinces society as a whole that aging and its difficulties are individual responsibilities. According to Morganroth Gullette (2017), older people must bear the burden of this social construction— it is their responsibility if getting old is difficult. People who are

growing older do not see that it is an entire system that produces ageism. As a result, this social construction of aging creates a fear of aging in people's minds.

3.1.2 Social Construction of Aging

Furman (1997) clearly explained that "old age is a socially constructed category" (p. 92). Furman found that this construction of old age occurs because society imposes certain norms on certain groups. These norms favour older people who attempt to conform to societal expectations around aging. Again, Furman, supported by Browne (1998) and Clarke (2011), argued that the dominant group itself decides how (not) to age in society. As social images of remaining youthful become accepted, it becomes normal not to age, and people adopt strategies to avoid looking old. Furthermore, if a person does not adhere to these standards, they may become what Clarke (2011) called "socially obsolete" (p. 81). Looking old is the exception, and those who refuse to conform to a set of values become stigmatized and are negatively labelled as "old" (Morganroth Gullette, 2004).

The dominant discourse in this context refers to a set of values found among a majority group who impose their point of view on other groups. The discourse prevails in today's ideology, which influences the image and the social status of aging. As stated by Rozanova (2009), older people who do not adhere to the images of an active older person can be called "the real old people" (p. 213); they are the ones who need to be "fixed" (p. 213). In other words, they need assistance and health services that will likely cost the government a great deal of money. The social values which describe aging also define how older people should be living, otherwise, they risk not being included as an important group in society and may be marginalized or treated differently from most of the population.

This definition of aging, once theorized, makes its way through political and economic spheres as well as a given society's values, thus defining the cultural norms of a group (Rozanova, 2009). Subsequently, it becomes reflected in all policies and services that are created to support people in their need for formal care. In our society, aging is seen as an individual problem and not as a social preoccupation. The aged individual becomes the only one responsible for the challenges they experience while aging. Therefore, the social, political and environmental contexts which affect the daily life of a person are overlooked by the government. The phenomenon of aging becomes well-defined within social norms and it guides policies and services.

Matthews (1979) indicates that aging is depicted negatively, and it is no surprise that an older person who lives with an illness or a disability will see herself as old, because the images and definitions surrounding her depict older people as frail. The dominant ideology is a powerful tool to describe, define and categorize people. The following quotation from de Beauvoir (1977) in her book entitled *Old Age* helps to explain how discourse can be powerful: "Since the child is a potential active member, society ensures its own future by investing in him, whereas in its eyes the aged person is no more than a corpse under suspended sentence" (p. 244). This dominant discourse continues even to this day to influence different fields of practice that are concerned with the aging population. King (2006) stated that a group that holds power and has access to better resources (p. 48) can easily decide the place certain groups who have less power must occupy within society's hierarchy. This is the dominant ideology imposed on people with less power and fewer resources (for example, an aging population). Thus, ageism is a powerful force that has an impact on attitudes towards those who are old. Scharf and Bartlam (2008) argued that ageism produces inequalities

on different levels—material, social, services—all of which may lead to the exclusion of the aging population in a community.

The media plays a major role in shaping social perceptions on aging. In fact, Oró-Piqueras (2014) demonstrated that the media projects a very negative image of older women, not to mention that they are sometimes even portrayed as “evil women who manipulate others” (p. 20).

For Arber, Davidson and Ginn (2003), aging is often portrayed in the media as a phase of life that is hard to cope with by perpetuating various negative images and descriptions of old age. They clearly show how the media often presents statistics and data, most of the time in a negative way, concerning older women rather than focusing on their perspectives and lived experiences. Instead, older women are negatively portrayed as frail, not participating in society or being isolated in their own home, and not taking an interest in daily life.

Authors such as Clark (2011), Matthews (1979) and Rozanova (2009) highlighted the negative features associated with an older woman because of her aging body. For example, she is described as “slow”, “incapable of doing tasks by herself” and “forgetful” because her body is growing old. Automatically, any difficulties encountered, such as forgetting to do a task (e.g., pay a bill), are attributed to her age. From the time a woman ages, it is as if she does not have the right to make a mistake otherwise she will be categorized as a person who needs care, or, as explained by Higgs and Gilleard (2014), she will be “[placed] in care” (p. 5). Older people are reminded of their old age in the same way that they are defined as being frail (Higgs & Gilleard, 2014). Moreover, society attributes certain social places and statuses to older people. Keating and Phillips (2008) indicated that research has often used a descriptive approach

and has failed to take into consideration the daily lives and expertise of the aging. The damaging meaning of being old in the dominant discourse is being produced and reproduced constantly.

Some articles suggest that older people are considered desirable depending on their level of productivity. If an older woman is not socially engaged or physically active, she is disregarded by a society obsessed with the notion of productivity (Clarke, 2011). Society uses descriptors such as *attractive*, *productive*, and *engaged* to describe how a person must act; in a word, that person must be active. Interestingly, the word *active* is more typically attributed to youth than to older people. As some authors have stated, being old constitutes a distinct social category (Cruikshank, 2003; Furman, 1997). Cruikshank (2003) and Furman (1997) demonstrate the powerful impact of words such as “productive” or “engaged”, which contribute to the stigmatization of older people. As a result, older people internalize that definition and see themselves in a separate category (MacRae, 1990; Morganroth Gullette, 2004). Those who follow the rules and meet society’s standards may even reject members of their own group who do not comply. Since they do not want to be associated with the image of a frail and dependent person, they will exclude others even though they themselves are old (Calasanti, Selvin & King, 2006). Grenier and Hanley (2007) explained that: “Together, social and cultural conceptions create powerful sentiments not only about what it means to be an older woman, but also social relations and organizational practices that reinforce such beliefs” (p. 214). Older people and other members of society adhere to this set of criteria and accept the definition of aging that is socially constructed.

All these definitions about aging can easily be established in people’s minds, a phenomenon Morganroth Gullette (2004) called being “aged by culture” (p. 38).

Morganroth Gullette (2004) explained: “Lacking age studies, Americans are led to desire anti-aging products rather than age-conscious ideas” (p. 22). As such, there is a link between internalizing the dominant discourse on aging and believing that all the advertising about anti-aging is the best way to age successfully. These descriptions of how to age not only provide a negative image of people who are older, but they also influence various levels of society. These manufactured criteria and definitions have created the socially constructed phenomenon of aging.

Some authors who study aging have experienced strong reactions to their research. Morganroth Gullette (2004) faced negative reactions about her work on aging. Friedan (1993) mentioned how negatively some people reacted to and commented about her study on aging. Similarly, de Beauvoir (1977) illustrated how negative labels could easily influence the perceptions about aging of those who were not old. In her book, de Beauvoir (1977) said that she was surprised by the reaction of her colleagues regarding the focus on aging in her essay. Some commented that it must be boring and depressing to conduct research on such a topic. When asked why she was interested in this field, de Beauvoir (1977) explained:

We must stop cheating: the whole meaning of our life is in the question in the future that is waiting for us. If we don't know what we are going to be, we cannot know what we are; let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman (p. 12).

For Browne (1998) and Sontag (1972), aging is a reality that must be acknowledged rather than ignored or denied. Older people are frequently described as having nothing to do (i.e., no job, no social engagement, no volunteer work) because they are old, so for many people, they are seen as waiting for the end to come. Such descriptions about aging have contributed to ageism in society and have had a detrimental impact on the

lives of older people. All those descriptions contribute to a negative perception that people have about them.

The term ageism is used to name discriminatory and derogatory actions against older people. There are certain groups, such as policy makers or politicians, who use their power to ensure that older people remain the subordinate group throughout their relationship or contact with them. Subordination is achieved through words and actions which create discrimination. This perception of aging impacts the policies made about aging (Carney, 2018).

Ageism impacts not only the everyday lives of older women, but also the structure of the system in which they live. As some authors explain, these structures can include home services and social policies (Clarke, 2011; Estes, 2001). Cruikshank (2003) explained that women find ageism more difficult because they are “already devalued as a female” (p. 139). People face a society that promotes ageism, but an older woman is doubly discriminated against because she is old and female. Copper (1988) explained how older women face ageism daily: “The ageism which old women experience is firmly embedded in sexism—an extension of the male power to define, control values, erase, disempower and divide” (p. 73). Older women can find it difficult to live in a world where old people are not important and where society is not interested in listening to them. It can be that much harder for women to see their place in society and in their environment because they are women as well as aging.

3.2 Older Women

A significant number of authors have identified stereotypes and prejudices towards older women. These stereotypes lead women to question themselves, as they wonder whether there is still a place for them in their environment and in the general population

because of the marginalization they may feel (Grenier & Hanley, 2007). Sontag (1972) explained that aging is portrayed as “a moral disorder and a social pathology” (p. 29). This is especially true of women who have played major roles within the familial or private sphere. These women are unable to find their place in a society that values youthfulness and productivity. Sontag (1972) added, “Aging is much more a social judgment than a biological eventuality” (p. 32). Browne (1998) clearly demonstrated that older women are just as likely to be excluded from society as any other minority group. As women grow older, they struggle with societal interpretations that equate aging with loss and infirmity.

Some interpretations and myths have become a part of society’s core narratives about aged women, aged adults, and other oppressed people (Browne, 1998). Clarke (2011) explained that society is oriented towards making sure that old people are not visible around or among others. When the human body starts manifesting signs of aging—a normal process—it is perceived to be less acceptable in a woman’s body due to patriarchal and sexist norms. Older women become “invisible in front of others” (p. 119) because of the signs of aging in their body. This invisibility is observed when these same women are dismissed within a group or even when comments made about their aging body are present in the media. This perception of aging bodies has an impact on the marginalization of their owners.

Some older people are marginalized due to the definitions and descriptions that are constructed about them. Old age is described as a terrible experience or a mostly negative experience where individuals who experience it are portrayed as a burden. These images contribute to a cynical view of aging, and some often find themselves pushed aside. Other times, older people try not to disturb others or be seen by others for

fear of being treated negatively. They are being marginalized by society like many other groups who are perceived as different (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006). Furthermore, today's older women came of age when being a woman meant being a wife and a mother whose job was within the domestic sphere, and they did not have a voice as choices were made for them. Their low status is not simply a result of being a woman; it is also the result of old age (Browne, 1998; Clarke, 2011; Gee & Kimball, 1987; Sontag, 1972). This sexist attitude towards women (Gee & Kimball, 1987) allows an amplification of oppression as women age (Clarke, 2011). According to Clarke (2011), older women are the most marginalized and devalued group in society (p. 30). This perspective applies not only to older women, but to those living alone or looking aged who are also seen as enduring a painful life.

As a result, old women may withdraw from their environment by leaving the home increasingly less often (Aronson, 2002). Furthermore, if others such as the media portray them as a burden to society, there is a chance that they will exclude themselves to lessen their own sadness. Aronson (2002) noted, "This resignation buttressed them against vulnerability and distress" (p. 410). Groups that do not fit into society's definition as productive or socially engaged feel that they are responsible for the negative perception of others and are more likely to exclude themselves from social activities. Older people who remain absent from these social commitments do so because they are afraid of being rejected by others and because they are perceived as old people in constantly negative ways (Kinsel, 2005). In other words, older people may come to internalize ageism (Kinsel, 2005) and end up believing that they are bothering others and that they are more of a burden than a contribution to society. These same older people prefer to

stay in the shadows. All these perpetual negative images and descriptions of older people leave their mark on social and political structures.

Organizational practices reinforce negative perceptions of aging, which are in turn reflected in the programs and services implemented for the assumed benefit of older people. For instance, Terrill and Gullifer (2010) stated that these powerful groups tend to equate aging with illness, and when studies emphasize the losses associated with aging rather than any advantages, policies and practices are shaped and influenced by these negative definitions and by the social construction of aging. As expressed by Estes (2001), the perception of frailty influences policies, practices and services that focus on health, and more specifically, on physical health services as meeting the most important needs of the aging population. Estes (2001) clearly demonstrated how social policies shape an individual's aging experience. For instance, there is a chance these policies might persuade practitioners to see the older population as frail and dependent on the health system, without considering their other needs such as home services (meals or informal support, among others). This can prevent professionals from considering what old people have to say in terms of their needs and their ideas about the way they can live and improve their daily lives.

However, being an older person does not necessarily mean being fragile and facing illness with multiple needs. While many older people are in good health, the popular discourse tends to describe them as having poor health. These individuals possess resources that contribute to their well-being and enable them to meet the challenges they face daily (Kinsel, 2005). Thus, they are more than individuals who are fragile and deprived of resources to manage their daily lives. Furthermore, older women

also contribute to society through their involvement in their community and the support they provide to others (Nesteruk & Price, 2011; Wenger & Keating, 2008).

The power of words used to define aging influences how a person ages. Hence, if a woman is portrayed as too frail, dependent, or unproductive, she is described as having limited worth to society. Furthermore, policies, services, and organizational structures often serve as reminders that she is an old and frail woman.

Place is another element to consider. According to Keating (2008), the definition of the rural context will influence how people who still live in those places are seen and understood by others. This is very important, because if older women are confronted by multiple challenges while living in a rural context, they may face a triple jeopardy. Therefore, it is essential to study the reality of rural communities. The following pages will explain the different characteristics that constitute rurality and contribute to the quality of life for its population, especially older women.

3.3 Rurality

According to Keating (2008), Shenk (1998a) and Thériault and Rousseau (2010), the public in general perceives rural areas as less attractive places to live since some of these areas have certain challenges to overcome. Often, rural communities are described as having a weak economy, inadequate services, and a declining population with the exodus of youth to urban areas. Furthermore, some of their main services may have been shut down, including schools, parishes, and banks. Some within the public sphere or policy makers even believe that rural areas are unworthy places in which to dwell, and this attitude adds to their marginalization (Keating, 2008; Shenk, 1998a). Such a description of rural settings extends to the people who live in these areas leading to feelings of marginalization.

3.3.1 Social Description of Rurality

Often, rural settings are depicted as charming with many idyllic features that characterize them as pleasant places to live (Chapman & Peace, 2008). Many older people living in rural areas are still very attached to their community and want to stay there as long as possible (Keating, 2008).

Scholars have noted a lack of studies of rural regions and their aging populations, even though many older people remain in rural areas (Chapman & Peace, 2008; Keating, 2008; Thériault & Rousseau, 2010). For instance, MacRae (1996) and Terrill and Gullifer (2010) firmly believed that there is a vast gap in knowledge to be filled with regard to studies in rural settings on aging populations. As Keating, Eales and Phillips (2013) pointed out in their research, rural regions possess their own strengths and resources to combat the marginalization of an aging population. For instance, older people work towards affordable housing and take care of those who are less fortunate by serving meals or by keeping an eye on others' needs. These examples demonstrate how informal support systems take over within these communities. Unfortunately, this support is not often taken into consideration in public discussions or social planning on aging.

Many stakeholders such as politicians and even members of society tend to perceive people living in these rural settings as not worthy of investment in, for example, public services or the local economy. These negative ideas and attitudes towards rurality have an impact on older women who live in rural regions (Dorfman, Méndez & Osterhaus, 2009; Scharf & Bartlam, 2008; Thériault & Rousseau, 2010).

3.3.2 Older Women Living in Rural Settings

Shenk (1998b) explained that older women can overcome the difficulties associated with the lack of services in rural settings by turning towards informal supports such as family, friends, and neighbours. These women are effectively able to find help when they need it. Shenk (1998b) also agreed that these support systems are often not recognized by the public even though they are what makes these women feel good about living in rural communities.

Shenk (1998a) also argued that studies on rurality are needed to give voice to older women who live in those areas: “The voices and views of rural older women themselves must be considered if we are to fully understand the rural aging experience, and we cannot ignore the diversity within the rural aging population” (p. 23). Moreover, Shenk (1998a) considered the absence of the voice of rural older women in research to be a major source of concern. Shenk (1998a; 1998b) determined that older women possessed a rich understanding of rural communities because they had been living in the same place for their entire lives. Living in a rural community meant a lot for these women. According to Shenk (1998b), they have many experiences to share with others about the meaning of life in those places. Aronson (2002), Dorfman et al. (2009), and Hayes (2006) also explained that it is important to acknowledge that most older women in rural settings are widowed and therefore are more likely to live alone and on a single income. This is why it is important to listen to what they have to say.

Furthermore, Shenk (1998b) explained that while older women encounter difficulties in their daily life, they work hard to remain independent as long as they can. They will do whatever they can to receive help from members of the community to stay in their homes longer. Even if they are aware that someday they might need to leave, for

now they are seeking support to remain at home. Certainly, the experience they acquired in the domain of domestic work has given them the expertise to live by themselves. These women possess the abilities to overcome the difficulties they face daily, and they do find the resources to receive support when they need help.

The daily reality of older women has been influenced by the social construction of them as a group who cannot live by themselves because they are old and they are women. They are seen as vulnerable and less independent because they are older women (Petry, 2003). Socially, a woman is not perceived as being able to live independently. If she is, living on her own, someone must look after her. However, as Petry (2003) indicated, being independent is very important for older women, but even though these women see themselves as independent, society still describes them as being dependent on others because of their age. Throughout a woman's life, she was referred to as a person who belonged to someone else: the daughter of so-and-so, the wife of so-and-so. These terms have created a social perception of women as needing someone to live with them and being unable to live independently. This has an impact on how others treat them—telling them what to do and how to do it. However, many studies demonstrate that older women have more than one resource when the time comes to seek support (Kinsel, 2005; Nesteruk & Price, 2011; Wenger & Keating, 2008).

While staying alone is often synonymous with living a lonely life, van den Hoonaard (2009) in her study of widows found that these women expressed pleasure and satisfaction through remaining in their home by themselves. They were proud of being capable of being by themselves in their home. Another factor that was advanced by MacDonald (2006) is that, even with the capacity to live by themselves, some older women face financial challenges because they live on a single income. Women with

fewer financial resources may be more adversely affected when their regions face shortages of services that are helpful in their day-to-day activities. Problems arise when there is less concern about older women and their needs to stay at home (Aronson, 2002). More often than not, society and government do not listen to older people when they express their need for support to stay longer in their home (Grenier & Hanley, 2007). In the case of older women, Carney (2018) indicated that sexism and ageism have been institutionalized and this affects program and service delivery. Because gender and age are ignored, the government does not invest meaningfully in programs for the aged that answer the needs of both men and women (Carney, 2018). Furthermore, when older women think they are undeserving, that they are a burden, or they require too many services, they tend to seek fewer services. Meanwhile, they remain in their home and, at the same time, they isolate themselves. In this case, they can easily become invisible (Aronson, 2002).

Older women living alone with few means find themselves in a vulnerable position (Leith, 2006), and those in rural areas may find they are more financially at risk (Stark-Wroblewski, Edelbaum & Bello, 2008). Conditions that can create this financial vulnerability include a lack of formal services, support, and transportation as well as difficult economic situations. For instance, their limited participation in paid labour has contributed to their financial fragility (Chapman & Peace, 2008; Dorfman et al., 2009; Stark-Wroblewski, Edelbaum & Bello, 2008). Hayes (2006) argued that vulnerability is greater if a woman is aged 75 years or over and has health problems. Even with all the challenges that occur later in life, Shenk (1998b) explained that older women are aware of these difficulties during “the last chapter of their life” (p. 17). Despite this, they still want to remain in their rural communities. Indeed, older women experienced many

difficulties and challenges during their lifetime either raising a family with little to spare or living in poor conditions. These situations have made them stronger and prepared them for the challenges of living as a single person in an isolated and remote location (Shenk, 1998b).

Older women rely on their lived experiences to support them. Furthermore, Shenk (1998b) raised two important issues about women living in rural regions: an attachment to their locale and its privacy, and a feeling of pride in ownership of a house despite the challenges of living in these rural areas.

As older women face multiple challenges in rural settings, they develop many impressive strategies to try to overcome them. Women who have lived in their communities for a long time develop an informal support system (Chapman & Peace, 2008). However, this reliance on informal support can often go unnoticed even though some studies show how strong ties developed among people in rural settings in their daily life make them good places to live (Keating, Eales & Phillips, 2013).

Not all older people have the necessary resources to stay in their homes as long as they wish (Arbuthnot, Dawson & Hansen-Ketchum, 2007; Cruikshank, 2003; Thériault & Rousseau, 2010). However, the “interdependence” (Chapman & Peace, 2008, p. 31) developed in rural communities helps older women to maintain their autonomy and stay in their home longer. Even if rural realities change in the course of time, that interdependence has created a “cohesiveness” (Chapman & Peace, 2008, p. 31) with strong ties among residents. For older women, this interdependence and cohesiveness provides support to those who wish to remain autonomous and independent even when they need special assistance to remain in their place of choice (Keating, Eales & Phillips, 2013).

Values such as solidarity, providing support and helping others are important in rural settings. They help older women to remain longer in their community. Without them older women would be forced to relocate to an urban setting, where they would have to alter or rebuild their environment, identity, and support network. In this context, they might lose the independence that they had acquired and maintained throughout their life in their rural community.

Studies on older women and rurality have shown that place and home are central to their autonomy, as they need to feel at home to be able to maintain their independence. Chapman and Peace (2008), Hayes (2008), and Thériault and Rousseau (2010) demonstrated that place is a central dimension in the lives of older women. These women may find it difficult to picture themselves outside this familiar environment in a place they do not know and where they feel as though they do not belong. The autonomy that older women have developed is now maintained in their daily lives. They feel like they are part of a community because they remain in the same place. This acquired identity, built around a place of belonging and a familiar environment, is an important dimension that contributes to the well-being of these older women.

Chapman and Peace (2008) strongly urged policy makers to learn about the places where people are growing old in order to gain a better understanding of aging (Keating, Eales & Phillips, 2013). For instance, older women who have lived in rural areas all their lives define themselves through the one thing they know best, the place (Leith, 2006). A sense of place, which also includes environments, is built upon life experiences, experiences that define who these women are as human beings. What is more, place gives women a sense of who they are as older women living in rural communities. Their

home is the place where women have grown older, and this home describes and defines who they are today (Terrill & Gullifer, 2010).

Older women also define themselves according to their roles. These roles contribute to the meaning given to place because this is where these women lived and developed a sense of who they are. The home was, and still is, the one place where women can exercise their abilities and their expertise, where they feel a sense of accomplishment. As stated by Leith (2006), home represents the primary place for women because they have accomplished so much there that revolved around “family and home centred activities” (p. 319). They define themselves through the home, and many continue to define themselves through the housework they accomplished throughout their lives. For older women in rural settings, these gender roles mean that they faced limited choices (Shenk, 1998).

Despite changes occurring in their lives as they advance in age, many older women continue to engage in the activities for which they were recognized and valued when they were raising their children. As MacRae (1990) explains, “If the elderly mother believes she is still needed by her children, then motherhood can continue to exist for her as a meaningful role-identity in old age” (p. 260). Older women in rural settings who, when they are able, are involved in activities and community work, develop a support system or a collaborative exchange with regard to their diverse needs (Nadasen, 2008). This sense of support allows older women to view themselves as independent, and it contributes to their self-perception of being autonomous individuals. Hochschild (1973) cautions against seeing these women as isolated people who live in solitude with no social network. Having lived in their community all their lives, many women build a support network on which they can rely.

Women not only receive support, they also provide support for the people in their network (Glass & Vander Plaats, 2013). In addition to developing an identity tied to their place of belonging, asserting this identity provides them with independence, as it ensures that they depend on their families as little as possible (Glass & Vander Plaats, 2013). These women want to feel independent and in control of their daily lives as much as they can. Glass and Vander Plaats (2013) and Nadasen (2008) corroborated these findings in their studies by explaining that such involvement in social activities allows women to feel as though they are not too dependent on others.

Activities and community work create a strong sense of identity for women (MacRae, 1996, p. 375) and contribute to maintaining a quality of life while they age. When older women can participate in the organization of social events, such as preparing meals, decorating the room, and welcoming guests, they are able to continue to be involved in their communities. Their lived experiences have contributed to the development of an identity, a personality, and a certain expertise. This expertise enables them to give service to others (MacRae, 1990). Many older women in rural areas choose to stay in their homes because this is where they have developed a sense of self, where they feel it is best to live, and where they believe they can contribute to their community.

In rural settings, older women take part in activities within their communities. Their participation in such organizations allows them to be surrounded by people of the same age (Glass & Vander Plaats, 2013), in turn giving them a “sense of identity and comfort” (Arbuthnot et al., 2007, p. 42). Becoming involved leaves them with an overall feeling of having a better quality of life (Ryser & Halseth, 2011). In fact, Milan and Vézina (2011) presented Canadian statistics showing that the contribution of older

women makes up thirty percent of all volunteer work. It is imperative to consider all the volunteer work older women are doing within communities because it helps to better understand their important contribution to society.

It is also true that each rural community possesses its own realities. Keating and Phillips (2008) explain that society must recognize the “difference and the diversity” (p. 7) that exist in rural settings. In fact, both differences and similarities co-exist in rural areas. Every older person who lives in a rural community has her own specific needs, strengths, and resources to overcome challenges. As a group, older people share similarities in the way they deal with specific challenges relating to their environment.

The exploration of the above-mentioned concepts contributes to a better understanding of the lives of older people in rural communities. It also “give [s] voice to aging women” (Shenk, 1998b, p. 23), both as a group and as individuals. The concepts that have been developed in this chapter have helped to increase our knowledge of aging and ageism. Older women have lived with many daily pressures simply because they lived alone, and they were older. They experienced the triple threat of age, gender, and rurality (; Chapman & Peace, 2008; Keating, 2008; Shenk, 1998a&b).

3.4 Need for New Research

Although there are some studies on aging Francophone populations, most of them concentrate on the topic of health. For instance, the *Consortium national de formation en santé* (CNFS) funded studies that focused on the health of Francophones and Acadians as a minority group throughout Canada. Between 2009 and 2012, the CNFS funded 53 studies and among them, only four were on aging populations (CNFS, 2009).

Furthermore, of those four, only one was about life satisfaction and well-being in rural settings (Dupuis-Blanchard, 2009). Most of the CNFS studies related either to dementia

or home services. There were several studies that explored the concept of territory and rurality; however, these studies did not pertain specifically to older women. Despite the lack of research, the Francophone population in New Brunswick wants to talk about aging, from the perspective of being a contributor to the community rather than a burden on society. I noted this desire to study aging during lengthy informal discussions among members of the Acadian population. There is a place and a need for a study oriented towards the lived experiences of older women living in rural communities.

3.5 Summary of the Chapter

In this chapter, a review of the literature about older women (aged 75 years and older) focused on three dimensions of aging: ageism, older women and rurality. The authors who studied the concept of ageism have made it possible to understand what ageism is, how it is constructed, and its impact on the lives of older women. Some of the studies in this review of the literature have shown that older women face a multitude of stereotypes about themselves because they were born in another era and because they are now older. Other authors illustrated the characteristics of rural areas and the challenges faced by these regions. A few of them examined more specifically the challenges of living in rural areas for older women. Studies about rural settings stress the importance of place and home in the lives of older women. This chapter concludes with a section that explains the need for further studies about Acadian, Francophone older women who live in rural regions in New Brunswick. The next chapter presents the methodological process employed to carry out this qualitative study.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I will present the qualitative methodology used to conduct this phenomenological research. As van Manen (1984) explained, “phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld” (p. 37). I adopted the interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA) developed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) so that I was able to give an account of lived experiences of the participants. These authors developed their IPA by borrowing from Heidegger’s hermeneutic approach. In the next section, I explain how this methodology has the potential to illuminate the lived experiences of older Acadian, Francophone women and allow them to express their point of view on living in a rural setting. Following this, I describe the methods used in this study. This includes situating myself as a researcher as well as identifying ethical considerations. The chapter ends with a description of the recruitment process, data collection, and data analysis.

4.1 Phenomenology: A Hermeneutic Approach

According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 25), Heidegger reformulated phenomenology as an explicitly interpretive activity, and the connections that he made to hermeneutics are clearly important for interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). For this philosopher, hermeneutical phenomenology aimed to examine the lived experiences of people (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 24). Heidegger presented his phenomenological approach as such:

Phenomenology is concerned in part with examining something which may be latent, or disguised, as it emerges into the light. But it is also interested in examining the manifest thing as it appears on the surface because this is integrally connected with the deeper latent form—which it is both a part of, and apart from. (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, p. 24)

Phenomenological investigation focuses on experiences to better understand how people interpret a phenomenon and on the shared experiences constructed by a group taking part in the same history, culture, and language (Oksala, 2006). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) indicated that phenomenology is interested in what "... the experience of being human is *like*, in all of its various aspects..." (p. 11). In other words, this approach explores people's lives and what these experiences look like.

Phenomenology requires the researcher to return "to the lives of human experience" (Deschamps, 1993, p. 4, free translation). This epistemological posture allows the experience to unfold while allowing it to manifest itself, which facilitates the ensuing analysis (Deschamps, 1993). According to Creswell (2013) and Giorgi (1997), phenomenology refuses to take for granted that a phenomenon cannot be changed because it has always been the same for so long.

Van Manen (1984) expanded his explanation of phenomenology by stating that "phenomenology aims to come to a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (p. 37). In adopting Heidegger's phenomenological approach, which is explicitly interpretative, I have sought to arrive at an understanding of participants' lived experiences, their own interpretations of their reality, their world and their relationship with the world. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) clearly stated that people live in a world of interpretation of those surrounding them. Therefore, people are constantly in relation to individuals, symbolic objects and relationships (p. 18). This is the reason why I chose the methodology of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) to answer the following question: How do Acadian, Francophone women, aged 75 years and older, who live in a rural Francophone region of New Brunswick, talk about their daily life experiences? This general question is subdivided into two themes: what defines them,

and how they perceive their lived experiences. Because this research sought to understand and interpret the participants' everyday lives, I found Heidegger's phenomenological approach to be appropriate to answer the research question and better understand divergent or contradictory experiences.

According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), Heideggerian analysis implies that the researcher cannot set aside her own views, analysis or knowledge of phenomena. In their view, Heidegger asserted that the researcher, as one who lives in the world, cannot fully be abstracted from being part of that same world.

4.2 Qualitative Approach to Interviewing

This study explores in detail the similarities and differences between each woman's experience. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) encouraged recruiting a small number of participants because of the nature of phenomenology, which is to examine in great depth the lived experiences of each participant. According to these authors, a smaller number of participants is favoured, because phenomenological research looks to "...reveal something of the experience of each of those individuals" (p. 3). This approach also contributes to achieving a greater interpretative understanding of people's lives when they are recalling their history (Groenewald, 2004; Lavery, 2003). This is the reason why I strove to recruit a maximum of 12 women. It enabled me to explore in depth their daily lives. Otherwise, with a larger number of people, it might be more difficult to capture the unique experiences and interpretations.

During interviews, participants "think", "feel" and "reflect" about the phenomenon they are experiencing. Those reflections start to have meaning when they recall what is happening to them (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 3). This is one of the reasons why a small number is encouraged within phenomenology to reveal the

essence of their experience. Furthermore, a small number of participants is fitting because a phenomenological study looks for a “homogeneous group” as it aims to examine “convergence and divergence in some detail” (p. 3). Consequently, this study used qualitative methods, more specifically, phenomenology to obtain information about the lived experiences of the older women.

4.3 The Methods

4.3.1 Situating Myself as a Researcher

To be faithful to the comments made by the participants in this study, the researcher must be aware of society’s perceptions around aging. Descriptions of older people are often negative, and they are seen as a burden. Those perceptions can influence older people’s perceptions of themselves. I, therefore took an epistemological stance that attempted to reverse such a social discourse. My own position was situated within a desire to understand the circumstances that had an impact on the lives of the older women. In the view of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), the researcher’s position is very important because she must possess a “combination of reflective, critical and conceptual thinking” (p. 40). With phenomenology as my methodology, it became obvious that to understand the experiences of these older women, it was necessary to listen to their interpretation of their life experiences.

In addition, as a practitioner in the field of social work, I had the opportunity to intervene with older people, most of whom were older women who lived in rural areas. The way they were portrayed in society and my perceptions when working with them were quite different. These women were far from fragile, isolated, or just waiting for the end of their lives. I undertook my research project to better appreciate their experiences.

Finally, before starting the recruitment of participants, I obtained all necessary and appropriate ethics approval, as described below.

4.3.2 Ethical Considerations

I received the approval of the Research Ethics Board of the University of New Brunswick to conduct this research. As Israel and Hay (2008) explained, researchers in the field of social sciences must ensure that there is the lowest possible risk to the participants. Furthermore, the researcher must not cause prejudice or do any harm to participants, communities, or environments. For that reason, an ethical sensitivity must be continuously developed during the entire research process. England (1994) indicated that “we need to locate ourselves in our work and to reflect on how our location influences the questions we ask, how we conduct our research, and how we write our research” (p. 251). Hence, as a researcher, I must not forget where I stand in relation to my research. In the context of this study, this means that even as an Acadian, Francophone woman raised in an Acadian rural community in New Brunswick, I do not necessarily know what it is like to live as an older woman in such a setting. I must respect participants’ voices and interpret what they have said in a fair way. It is also important to recognize that the results of such studies can have repercussions on how practitioners intervene (Stoppard & McMullen, 2003).

The research process of this study was based on respect, trust, and confidentiality with regard to the participants and the communities in which they live. For example, a feeling of trust between the participants and the researcher was developed by speaking on the phone with the participants before the formal interviews began. The objective of the first conversation was simply to discuss any needs or limitations that I should consider during the upcoming interview. Above all, during this phase, we were able to

become acquainted with each other a little and thus establish a degree of mutual trust. This process corresponds to what Israel and Hay (2008) call “ethical behaviours” (p. 2). I expected that the participants would be more likely to trust the process and to fully participate in it. Trust is established when the researcher is “honest” and “honourable” (Israel & Hay, 2008, p. 3).

4.3.3 Confidentiality

The researcher must be sure to maintain confidentiality throughout the study. This was particularly important, as certain communities I visited only had around 800 inhabitants (Statistics Canada, 2010). Confidentiality can be more difficult to achieve in rural settings because people often know each other. Hence, I was unsure about whether to make my presence known by, for example, parking in front of the participant’s house. When I was entering each woman’s house, I asked her if she wanted me to park elsewhere, explaining that I was concerned about maintaining confidentiality. Not one woman asked me to relocate the car. One participant responded to my concern about confidentiality in this way: “I allowed you in my home, I opened the door to you, so that means I accepted that you are here”. On the other hand, participants were more preoccupied with their name being used in the study. To reassure them, I explained that I would use a pseudonym, and I gave them my word that the place where they lived would not be identifiable, as was explained in the consent form. All the women were appreciative of this assurance. Moreover, the data for this study was kept in a locked file, and I was the only one who had access to the information. I made sure that the transcripts were protected by a password on my computer.

The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants; it was these recordings that were used to produce the transcriptions. Oral consent was obtained from

the participants before starting the interview. To do this, I asked the following question: “Mrs. _____, do you consent for me to record our conversation?” By my recording her consent, the participant did not need to sign a consent letter. This method of obtaining consent is outlined in TCPS2, chapter 3, article 3.12 of the Tri-Council Policies. When I asked this question, one participant who had agreed to be interviewed countered that if she allowed me into her house, it meant she was agreeing to do the interview. She wondered why it was necessary to restate her consent.

Only two women did not want our conversation to be recorded, so they signed a written consent form. Both women explained the reason why they did not want to be recorded. One explained that she was once interviewed by a journalist, and she did not find that what she said was reported accurately in the news, so she was disappointed. As a result, she did not want to be recorded and told herself that she would never again agree to be recorded. The other woman stated that she did not feel comfortable knowing that everything she said would be recorded. For these two interviews, the two women agreed that I take written notes as a way of gathering information.

I respected the participants by informing them that they could take a break if they became tired during the interview. I also offered to finish the interview at a later date if they needed to stop. None of the participants asked to pause the interview for a break. In addition to providing a more in-depth understanding of the subject, each interviewee was advised that she could decide how much time she wanted to spend on any given question.

I provided each participant with an information letter which contained a detailed explanation of the study and the purpose of the research. I informed the participants that if they had any worries about our interview, they could call the number that was

provided on the information letter. They could also contact the research ethics board if they had any questions or concerns. All the participants kept the information sheet that was given to them.

I also had with me a list of resources located in the region in the event some of the participants needed support after our conversation. I explained to them that the provision of this list was an ethical requirement of the research. However, they clearly stated that they did not see the purpose of accepting the list because they had already agreed to participate in this study. They found it surprising that such a list was provided to them as they were glad to talk about their experiences as older women. Some mentioned that there were not many people who were interested in their experiences. At the end of the interview, I asked each woman how she felt about our conversation, and all of them said they were pleased to have participated in this study. None asked for the list of resources. I was not concerned that the women did not want the list mainly because no critical or difficult disclosures were made during the interviews.

4.3.4 Settings

For this study, it is necessary to explain what constitutes a rural setting as this type of setting was one of the criteria for selecting participants. Shenk (1998a) defined a rural setting based on the number of inhabitants that live in a location. In addition to the number of inhabitants, I also used the number of available public services as a criterion to determine if the setting was indeed rural. For instance, few public services meant that there was no health centre, no public transportation, and sometimes not even a major grocery store. In terms of political jurisdiction, these rural regions were identified as local service districts (LSDs). Several had 1,500 inhabitants or fewer, and French was the main language spoken. For Simard (2015), rural settings are defined as those

locations with a population of 2,500 or less (p. 107). In addition, Simard (2015) describes *small communities* as communities that have 500 or fewer inhabitants.

Some of the settings involved in this research had 500 inhabitants or fewer; many did not have public services or a grocery store. The inhabitants of these communities needed transportation to access these services because they lived far away from them. The communities where I went to for the interviews did not have a corner store close to participants' homes. In one of the communities, for instance, the closest convenience store was at least a thirty-minute walk away. In another community location, the church was closed because no one attended mass anymore. The nearest church was fifteen minutes away by car. People needed to have access to a car or access to members of the community who could drive them to church. In all the settings, the view that participants saw from their window was either the sea or fields. There were no houses very close by. In another location, I noticed that no cars passed in front of the participant's house during the time I was there (i.e., one and a half hours). I also observed that the driveway was very grassy, and to me this was an indication that not many cars came to her house. Perhaps that was why, as I was leaving, she mentioned, "You can come back, I don't have a ton of visitors."

4.3.5 Recruitment

Before starting to recruit, I set the criteria in terms of who could participate in this study and their profile. I was principally interested in Acadian, Francophone women. It is important to note that the terms *Acadian* and *Francophone* are not interchangeable. There can be older women whose first language was French, but who do not consider themselves Acadian. For this study, I did not want to exclude these women. In the publicity both terms were used. By doing this, I avoided confusion in the recruitment

process. To meet the final selection criteria, the women had to be aged 75 years or older and living in their community, meaning that they were not living in a nursing home or in an apartment with assisted living.

To secure the participation of older women, I placed advertisements (Appendix A) twice in parish newsletters and contacted the director of the community radio station. I did a live radio interview to explain the study and provided my name and phone number. I also used the snowball method to lead me to potential participants. I gave the advertisement, which contained my contact information, to people I met in different circumstances (for example, during meetings, informal conversations in my workplace or over a coffee with acquaintances). This advertising was circulated to women they knew, who then phoned me. Some of the women gave their telephone number to the people I met so I could call them. Many women told me, “Come see me when you start recruiting. My mother is 85 years old and still lives in her house,” or “My aunt is independent and in her home.” In the end, I did not need to advertise further because women came forward to participate voluntarily.

This study recruited a homogeneous group, in this case Acadian, Francophone women who live in a rural region. By the end of the recruitment period, 16 women aged 75 to 93 years had agreed to participate. Initially, I aimed at interviewing twelve women, but it was hard to say no to the others who asked to participate. The snowball method worked well because it encouraged enough women to participate in the research. The profile of the participants is presented below.

4.3.6 Participants

I interviewed 16 Acadian, Francophone women between the ages of 75 and 93 years who were all living in their community. All were widows except for one

participant who had been single her whole life. All but three participants lived alone. One participant lived with her son and his family. While she lived with her family, she saw herself as independent; for example, she stayed all day alone in the house when her son and his wife were working. Moreover, she spent a lot of time alone when her family travelled. One participant had an adult child with special needs living at home whom she took care of. Another one lived with her two children who moved in after receiving treatments for cancer because they needed her help. The two participants who lived with their children appreciate that their children stay with them in a living arrangement that was negotiated and mutually beneficial (e.g., safe living environment for the parent and help with chores for the children).

All but two women had children. Eight of them did not live near their children. Eleven participants still lived in the same place where they had raised a family. The one who did not have children has resided in the same place for 46 years. The woman who remained single and had no children had been living in her home for seventeen years. As for educational levels, two went to school until grade 5, four studied until grade 8, one reached grade 9, two reached grade 10, and two reached grade 11. Three women had college diplomas, and two had university degrees. Sociodemographic Profil :

Participants	Age	Marital status	Highest level of education attained	Children
16 women	Average 88,75 years old	15 widows	Elementary school: 6	14 had children
		1 never married		
			High school: 5	2 never had children
			High school diploma: 3	
			University diploma: 2	

Participants	Housing situation	Geographic location	Geographical proximity with her children
16 women	Three live with family members	11 still live in the same house where they raise their family	8 lived near children
	13 live alone	4 live in the same community where they were born	6 did not lived near their children
		One moved in this rural community 17 years ago	

4.3.7 Interviews

As Schinckus (2009) explained, “science remains a human activity” (p. 97, free translation). The researcher must therefore start a dialogue over the course of the interviews and build a relationship that will allow participants to feel comfortable enough to participate. As de Vault (1990) and van den Hoonaard (2005) emphasized, the researcher must make sure to eliminate barriers to participation. It is essential that the participants be at the heart of the research and that they be seen as experts of their own lives—they are the best able to enlighten the researcher about their reality because they have an “important stake in what is covered” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 4). Phenomenology requires that people recall their own experience and describe their perspective in their own words, thus, everything they say must be considered. According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), their “experience should be examined in the way that it occurs, and in its own terms” (p. 12). This position gives a certain authority to participants, as they know more about their reality than the researcher.

It is the responsibility of the researcher to create an environment conducive to exchange and dialogue. In this study, I established a dialogue with participants through an interview guide which made it possible for the discussions to take place. I was able to acquaint myself with the participants and to better understand their environment (for example, what had made them happy up to that point in their life). The trusting and relaxed environment that we built together encouraged these women to feel more comfortable when talking about their daily lives. I started the interview with the following questions: “Tell me about yourself.” “How old are you?” “What is your marital status?” “Did you have children?” If yes, “How many?” “How long have you been living in this community?” I asked the questions one at a time, making sure each woman had finished answering a question before asking the next one.

The main data gathering tool was thus the in-depth interview. The rationale for choosing this tool was to establish an open dialogue (Black & Rubinstein, 2000; Furman, 1997; Gubrium, 1993) and to give the participants enough room to decide the direction that the interview was taking. This approach made it possible to learn from what women had to say by asking questions such as, “What is it like to be an older woman living in this community?”

The length of the interview is rarely a concern for researchers who use in-depth interviewing (Luxton, 1980; van den Hoonaard, 2005). In this qualitative study, the interviews lasted between 90 and 150 minutes. I believe that the interview guide made it possible to acquire new knowledge on the topic at hand through the participants’ words. Sherk (1998a) explains how the in-depth interview enriches a study by adding: “... the knowledge and depth that enable us to understand what it is like to live and grow old in

such an environment” (p. 8). With this interview method, the study provides a wealth of knowledge and therefore permits a greater understanding of the women’s situation.

The interview guide started as follows: “Tell me about yourself”. This provided a way to get the conversation started, but after a short time, the women began to lead the conversation. Gubrium (1993) explained that the interview guide orients the conversation and avoids confusing the participants (Black & Rubinstein, 2000). I felt that these two important aspects were achieved during the interviews. The questions were formulated carefully so that the women would be comfortable and able to understand the meaning of the questions. Clearly, the participants needed to understand the words, because if they could not, they would find it difficult to express their thoughts. I made sure to create an informal setting for the interviews to cultivate an atmosphere of conviviality and friendliness.

The interview guide contained open-ended questions to provide an in-depth picture of the participants. All the questions were related to the following themes: living alone, aging as a woman, elements in the community that helped them stay in their home, challenges living in a rural setting, and life in a rural community. These themes promoted a genuine dialogue as evidenced by the length of the interviews. I also encouraged women to speak about aspects they found important and relevant in their daily community life. For example, I asked the following questions: “As an older woman living in a rural setting, how would you describe your life today?” “What are the elements that help you to stay in your rural community?” These open-ended questions encouraged a frank and open dialogue. The interview guide also included follow-up questions to allow participants to expand on their answers.

All the women decided where the conversation would be held in their home. Most happened at the kitchen table except for two which took place in the living room, with each of us in a rocking chair. During the visit, some women showed me their artwork (painting and crafts). Some took out pictures of their grandchildren, while others phoned their daughters to let them know I was there. One woman mentioned the following: “I can’t wait to phone my daughter to let her know how much I enjoyed our conversation”. When I arrived for the interviews, I observed that all the participants seemed glad to welcome me into their home and to take part in the research. Most of the women were waiting for me to arrive. Some were at the door or outside their house when I got there. Those who had a vegetable or flower garden showed me their yard work. Upon my departure, most of them thanked me for letting them talk about their experiences and their daily lives. They said it was rare that they had the chance to talk about themselves and their life. I felt privileged to be in their home and appreciated their generosity when they shared their experiences.

At the end of the interviews, I asked the women if they wished to receive a copy of the transcription, and they all said yes, except one due to her vision problems. She mentioned that if she had children, she would have saved a copy for them. I also told the women that I would get in touch with them in a week to see if they had thought of something else they would like to discuss. I explained that I would be more than happy to come back and continue the discussion. However, all of them said that they had nothing to add to our conversation.

I requested permission to phone them when the transcripts were ready to be mailed. At that time, they would have the opportunity to comment on our discussion. I wanted to confirm whether they were comfortable with the content or wanted something

to be deleted before proceeding with the analysis. One week after sending the transcript, I communicated with each of the participants to receive their comments and ensure the accuracy of the transcription of their statements. I was surprised that fifteen of the sixteen wanted a copy. One of the main reasons was apparently to give it as a gift to their children. When I called them a week later, one participant said, “It is the best gift I ever had. All my life is in there, and I didn’t think I possessed so many qualities. I cried when I read it. How can I thank you for that gift?” All the interviews were conducted and transcribed in French. The results were translated into English for the analysis.

I took these steps after the interview to guarantee my faithfulness to the phenomenological approach. This methodology strongly supports the idea of meeting participants more than once. Furthermore, I was thereby respectful of the participants who wished to have another meeting to pursue the interview. All of them declared that everything had been said during the first interview. Despite this response, I still made sure to speak with them twice after the interview to give them an opportunity to talk further if they wished to do so.

4.3.8 Data Collection

Data collected for this study were not limited to the interviews themselves, as I also immersed myself in the settings by conducting field observations while travelling around the region to obtain a better sense of community living. For example, I visited corner stores and looked over the information on the bulletin boards, read the parish bulletins, listened to the local radio station, and perused the local newspaper. I frequently noticed that there was nothing in these public spaces concerning the aging population such as activities available for them. I went to the nearest restaurant even though it was not in the community where the participants lived. There, people talked

about local issues, such as road maintenance, political decisions or the weather. I also observed that some communities still had a postal box at the front of each driveway in which to deliver mail.

Finally, I kept a research journal to keep track of my observations during data collection. All those observations offered rich additional information to complete the descriptions provided by the participants. The research journal contained both theoretical and methodological data which were useful during the analysis and interpretation phase of the study. The journal provided significant observations and thoughts about the interviews. This step allowed me to ensure that no essential aspects of the participants' life experiences were overlooked. When I heard new elements of their daily life which were important to them that they had not mentioned during interviews, I wrote them down in my journal (for example, one participant mentioned after the interview her lack of visitors and invited me to come back any time for a visit). During the field observation (and interviews), my journal allowed me to take detailed notes to learn about the environment and the space of these older women.

4.3.9 Data Transcription

This section explains the steps I undertook for the transcription of the interviews and the methods used for their analysis. A pseudonym was assigned to every transcript. In this way, I respected the confidentiality of the participants. Interviews were transcribed in full as soon as possible, most times almost immediately after the interview. I wanted to remember everything, such as their laughter, jokes or sadness expressed about life. It should be noted that several transcriptions were done with the help of an assistant who first read and signed a confidentiality contract. When this person completed the transcripts, I reviewed them while listening to the recordings to

determine if there was any relevant information missing. I then checked the accuracy of the transcriptions. Each interview was transcribed in its entirety, so no information was omitted. Two participants did not want our conversation to be recorded so I took notes instead. Sometimes, I asked them to repeat what they said to ensure I was writing the correct information. The two women were comfortable proceeding in this way. As soon as I got home, I transcribed the content of these two interviews so as not to lose the sense of what was said. I then started the data analysis.

4.3.10 Data Analysis

I decided not to use software for coding and analysis. I preferred to do the analysis and coding by hand because I thought it would be easier to remember the many details of the interviews. I proceeded by listening to the recorded interviews. These were then downloaded to a password protected computer. First, I read the transcripts attentively followed by a second reading to immerse myself in the participants' daily lives before beginning the coding. This made it possible to become intensely familiar with the content.

Subsequently, I conducted a cross-interview reading of all the interviews to capture the similarities among the concepts that emerged from the participants and those studied in the review of the literature. This approach enabled me to analyze the dimensions mentioned by the participants by allowing important themes to emerge about each participant's experience. Along with the concepts identified in the theoretical framework study beforehand, I made sure to leave room for new concepts to emerge inductively within each transcript.

I read each interview several times to ensure that I did not miss any important points that the women brought up during the interviews. I reviewed each transcript very

carefully and included everything that could contribute to my knowledge about older women living in a rural setting. I coded patterns that emerged from data by themes.

I started the coding by grouping sentences or phrases. Creswell (2013) calls this process identifying “significant statements” (p. 82). When the women answered questions, I used their complete sentences or phrases. This allows the researcher to stay as close as possible to people’s descriptions of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Then, the analysis consisted of isolating the thematic elements which expressed the various phenomena of people’s lived experiences (van Manen, 1984). Although each participant can answer the questions independently, it is only when their answers are combined as a group that one can extract the meanings of their words. This step helped me to understand the way the women saw and interpreted their life in Acadian rural communities. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) explained that during coding,

Transcripts of interviews are analysed case by case through a systematic, qualitative analysis. This is then turned into a narrative account where the researcher’s analytic interpretation is presented in detail and is supported with verbatim extracts from participants. (p. 4)

Analysis therefore consisted of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. This procedure, according to Levesque-Lopman (2000), enables the participants’ life-world experiences to emerge without any preconceptions of their world by the researcher. In this way, their daily life becomes, for the researcher, a unique moment that they can only learn about by listening carefully to the interviews. The reading and re-reading of the field notes and observations about the environment (e.g., gestures and body language) made during and after the interviews enhance the understanding of the lived experiences of participants (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2010; van Manen, 1984).

4.4 Summary of the Chapter

In this chapter, I presented the research methodology used in this study. The interpretative phenomenology analysis of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), based on Heidegger's hermeneutic approach, provided the theoretical framework for this research design. This methodological choice allows the researcher to focus on the meaning that people give to their own experiences. Then, I discussed the methods that I chose to conduct this study about older women. First, I situated myself as a researcher taking part in a phenomenological study which requires that I take a critical stance about the experience of older women. Second, I elaborated on ethical considerations with regard to confidentiality in a rural setting. Because of the setting where the study took place, I felt it necessary to describe what constituted a rural community. Third, I explained the research process which included a section on recruitment, participants, and interviews. Fourth, I provided detailed information about the steps undertaken to transcribe the interviews and the process used to analyze data collected.

In the next chapter, the results of the study will be presented. Before doing this, I have included two short stories of women who were interviewed to better grasp how they experience their life as older women living in a rural setting.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of this study. Participants brought up several themes and elaborated on their experiences as older women living in rural settings. Themes such as living in one's home were discussed along with home being an integral part of their identity. Participants spoke about their satisfaction despite the challenges of living alone, and the choice they made to remain in their own home. This choice was seen as a determining factor in their ability to control their own life.

However, participants also shared a variety of contradictions during the interviews. For example, they freely expressed their gratitude for living in such a good community where they could rely on others to help remain in their home. Meanwhile, during the interviews, they also explained how difficult it was sometimes to reach out for help to the newcomers in their community.

While they appreciated that rural regions are lovely places to live, most of the women felt the government had let them down by closing many of the services, thus making it more challenging to remain there. For example, some explained that they no longer had services such as the *Caisse Populaire* (Credit Union) in their rural communities, so they did not have access to a nearby place where they could withdraw money from their account or pay their bills in person, for instance. Other participants said that they were still independent, but that they required the help of others to stay in their home. These examples are only a few of the contradictions they revealed during this research.

Participants also talked about living independently as older women and the ways in which they have created a support network by accepting and giving support. Many of

the women elaborated on their perception that rural communities are neglected by the government, and on the issues they face with newcomers to rural regions, as well as and their attachment to their community.

Two stories will introduce this chapter. They provide a sense of how the participants talked about their daily life. First, we will hear about Valerie and then from Annabelle.

Valerie is 87 years old and has lived in the same house since 1970. She lives alone in a small home that from the outside looks as if it might be deserted. The trees are not maintained and obstruct any view of the house. There is a small shed right next to her house which is also not maintained and might be perceived as unsafe. A passer-by who comes upon the house may think that it is unsuitable for habitation.

Valerie lives in a very isolated parish. It is impossible to get to a convenience store on foot, and there are no services nearby. Valerie lives with a visual impairment, so she no longer drives and must rely on others to get around. Even with this lack of services and the limitations she experiences in moving around her house and outside, Valerie insists that she is happy with her life and describes how different elements help her to remain in her home. She also explains how the rural setting brings her satisfaction because she feels like a member of her community.

When I arrived at her house, Valerie was outside waiting for me. Her very first sentence when I got out of the car made it clear that she is very aware of the sort of impression her house makes. “My house, it’s not a castle, but it’s my home,” she announced. Over the course of our conversation, she mentioned several times that her house was not well maintained, pointing out how difficult it was to take care of the exterior. Valerie showed me her yard, and, at that time, she explained that somebody

would come shortly to take care of it. I had the impression that she wanted to show me she was taking care of her house even if it did not appear so. It was clear to me that she felt that she had to apologize for the condition of her home. Valerie continued to insist that she was going to take care of her property soon. She even explained how she would go about it, for example, by hiring someone. Before even starting to talk about the study that brought me to her home, she felt the need to justify the state of her physical environment.

At first, the scenery that surrounded Valerie was striking. Not far from her home, on the other side of the road, I saw her parents' house. They had died a long time ago, but the house was still standing, albeit abandoned and falling into ruins. It was an enormous house that gave the impression of being an old tree still standing despite its old age. The house was leaning heavily to the right. In addition, in front of the parents' house, Valerie's 75-year-old brother lived in an old house that could also be described as poorly maintained. After telling me who lived near her house, she took the time to explain the reason why there were plates on her porch: Valerie fed stray cats because she liked to see these cats visit her, and so she always kept dishes of food on her steps.

Afterwards, she mused, "Maybe people think I don't have a good life, but I am happy with my life". Valerie knew that the appearance of her house influenced how people described her. It was an image of her being isolated, lonely and frail. Still, she asserted that she was content, and described an experience that demonstrated what it meant to her to be happy with her life.

There was an activity at the Golden Age Club that she wanted to attend because, as long as her eyes were still good enough to play cards, she wanted to participate. Valerie said she called a few women who also played cards, but none of them were planning to

go this time. So, she told herself, “I will not go this time,” then she went to rest on her couch. A few minutes later, two acquaintances knocked at her door. She asked them jokingly, “Are you lost?” They replied, “No, we came to get you to play cards at the Golden Age Club. We knew you wanted to play and that you didn’t have a ride.”

Valerie, with tears in her eyes, explained that people were so nice to her. She added that she told them, “I can’t believe you went out of your way to pick me up.” Her acquaintances also wrote down her phone number and said, “We’ll call you next week, and if you don’t have a way to get there, we’ll pick you up.” Valerie concluded with this remark:

I didn’t think people cared for me like that. You know in the city, you take a taxi, you take the bus, it’s not the same, it’s not personal, but this, it’s touching. No government program will replace the kindness of these people.

Although Valerie was aware of how people might describe her and talk about the condition of her house, she put the emphasis on her daily life and how she was happy.

The next story introduces another example of how an older woman is described as being pitiful because she lives alone in a remote location. Annabelle clearly put into words how she felt about being pitied as a woman in her situation. She did not want people to pity her simply because she is an older woman who lives alone. During the interview, she wanted to make sure the interview was recorded because she needed to be certain that she got her message across so that people would stop feeling sorry for her.

She asked:

Does this recorder work? OK, can you write this in your paper? I want people to stop telling me I’m pitiful. They say that I am pitiful because I live alone, because I’m old, because I remain in an isolated community, and because I stay in a parish that has no services. But I say that I don’t want pity, I want people to stop saying that I am pitiful. I don’t need to be pitied, OK.

Annabelle insisted that if she had to start her life again, she would make the same choice to live in this rural locality. One last thing she said very loudly: “I’m in paradise here, in this house. Sometimes people take pity on me. No, I shouldn’t be pitied, because I love it here.” She did not want to be pitied because she lived in a small house.

These two stories demonstrate the urgency that participants felt to communicate their rejection of the characterization of their lives as pitiful, pitiable, and sad. Valerie and Annabelle explained how older women are perceived by people around them because they are older women living alone. They were able to illustrate the pressure placed on them to leave their homes even though they say they are currently happy to live there. The next pages give a voice to the other participants who shared their lived experiences of being older women who reside alone in a Francophone rural setting. They demonstrate that the women feel a need to defend their desire and their choice to remain in their own homes in these rural areas.

In this chapter, being an older woman who sees herself as independent and living in a rural community will be presented as the meaning of her lived experience. One main subject that I explore is the idea of choice with regard to the women’s staying in their home and in their community. I identify the lack of services and highlight the negative discourse that society maintains about rural settings and their inhabitants according to the participants. Despite having to deal with a lack of services and witnessing major changes within their communities, such as the arrival of newcomers, these women speak passionately about their lived experiences in a place where they have lived most of their lives and where they give and receive support. Other important aspects include living independently as an older woman, living in a rural setting and the determination to stay as long as they can in their community. All these notions are bound by a common

thread: these women must constantly defend their choice to remain at home, because their living conditions (alone in a rural setting) are viewed negatively by society.

5.1 The Meaning of Living in Their Home

The notion of identity was central to the participants' accounts of their experiences. They described themselves as being independent and in control of their lives, even the two participants who had elected to live with their children. For example, Natasha explained: "If I have to move into a nursing home I will go, but for now I live here in my house. Despite the fact that my sons live with me, I am independent". Their choice to live independently while growing older did not frighten them. The participants kept explaining how important it was for them to be where they live right now. Even though they knew that someday they might have to leave their community, they took one day at the time to truly appreciate their daily life.

During the interviews, participants made sure to talk about the necessity for them to be heard and truly listened to. Some women mentioned that they were glad to see that I was interested in learning more about older people. They said that was important because they felt no one wanted to listen to what they had to say about their daily life.

5.1.1 Defining Their Identity in Relation to Home

The participants are constantly stigmatized by others because they are living alone as older women. Participants such as Joanie wondered what they would do if they lived somewhere else. Joanie said, "What would I do in a small apartment with nothing to do?" All the participants made it very clear in the interviews that they wished to remain in their rural home; I did not encounter one woman who was not sure of what she wanted to do in her life. Marie-Line declared, "I'm not lying. I feel good in my home,

and that's that." The women firmly stated that they were tired of being asked about remaining in their old house.

The participants described who they were by first describing their home. Joanie, for instance, was attached to her home because it was hers, and she would find it difficult to leave all her belongings behind:

I am at home, here, that helps with staying here. If I moved into an apartment, I would want two bedrooms. I have lots of things and I don't want to throw everything out. I'm attached to my things. The things that belong to me, they're mine. They're my story, that's me! These are the things that describe me.

During the interviews, some participants looked around the room and took the time to show me their belongings. Many of the ornaments that filled their houses were handmade by them. They had chosen the colour of the paint on the walls to complement the décor. It was as if they wanted to stress the fact that they owned all of it. Josée commented, "I enjoy my daily life because I own our home. I own my daily life. What I have is mine. I do not have much but it's mine." The women put a lot of emphasis on ownership: "It's mine". They wanted to show that what they owned allowed them to reveal who they were. They presented their possessions with pride. Marie-Line mentioned that she was the one who had made all her decorations. She said that her paintings demonstrated that she is a cat lover because most of her paintings were of cats. They did indeed represent her very well. These experiences as older women who lived alone forged their identity. The women spoke at length about this aspect of their identity. Furthermore, it was important for participants to own their home.

5.1.2 Owning Their Place

The women felt strongly that their life was their own. Their sense of self-ownership was closely tied to the notion of owning their home, even though some of

them mentioned that they did not have much else. Marie-Line explained this clearly: “I am content with my house. It’s not new, it’s old. The paintings on the walls, I’m the one who painted them. It’s only paint-by-numbers, but it’s mine. It’s good enough for me.” Most of the participants expressed their profound satisfaction with their life. They also wanted to make sure that people listened to them.

During the interviews, it was as if other people were also in the room, and the women were trying to convince them. At times, some women shouted loudly and used expressions such as, “OK, I am not lying!”, “I am OK!”, “Stop telling me I have to leave!” These exclamations were significant because they emphasized both a desire and a need to affirm their attachment to the place where they lived. All these expressions demonstrate that these women usually received the opposite message—that they must leave because they live alone. It was evident from the numerous expressions used that the participants wanted to convince me that they were fine to stay where they lived.

The women spoke at length about being alone in their home. Talking about their house was central to their descriptions of how they lived. Living in their house meant a great deal to them, as Josée explained: “I have my freedom with my house. I appreciate our day-to-day more because I own our home. My daily life is mine. What I possess, it’s mine. I don’t have much, but it belongs to me—it’s mine.” They defined their identity in relation to their home and being a homeowner, and this gave them a greater sense of ownership of their own life. Often, this sense of ownership was expressed by vehemently defending their choice to remain in their home.

5.1.3 Defending Their Choice of Living at Home

The women said explicitly that they had chosen to live where they were, and, with that same strong conviction, they had made this decision regardless of whether people

liked it or not. They were fine with their decision to remain alone because this allowed them to maintain control of their life.

At home, participants control what they do and make their own decisions: “I do everything I want to do. I eat when I want, and I go to sleep when I want, and I wake up when I want.” They felt this way because they were able to choose where to live. The participants expressed feelings of being free to decide, free to live in their home, and free to simply *be*, instead of having to do chores or activities to prove that they were active and engaged. They were happy with their life and their home, not being told what to do. This element of choice gave them a strong sense of satisfaction.

For most participants, the ability to choose to remain in their home was their way of exerting control over their life. Zoé, however, lives with her son and daughter-in-law. While they are away at work in the daytime or on vacation in the summer, she is by herself. She decided to move in with them following her son’s invitation to live with him, even though she was able to look after herself in her own home. Zoé explained that even though she did not live alone per se, she was living her life as she wanted to and she saw herself as being independent, since she was the one who made that choice.

5.1.4 Having a Choice Where to Live

The participants asserted that they were living where they were by choice. Véronique expressed it like this: “I’ll stay here for as long as I am able to, because it is what I want.” During some interviews, participants vividly communicated their choice of wanting to stay where they lived. They made it clear that living alone in their home was a choice they had made. They did not feel obliged to stay, and furthermore, they felt good being in their homes. They wanted this choice to be respected by the people around them. Natasha clearly explained her choice in this way:

I would go into apartments for the elderly, it's not difficult, but I don't want to, I love it more here. Yes, there's nothing that's keeping me from leaving if I want to leave, there's nothing keeping me from going. I can go if I want, but I prefer it here. And if you live in rural communities, it's because you want to, you're not forced to do that. Seniors today, they're not forced to do that.

That choice represented that she had control over decisions such as this one.

Even though participants expressed their happiness about where they lived, they still thought that people would prefer to see them living somewhere else. These women felt pressure from their family and members of the community to leave their home. As these women did not want their voice to go unheard, they wished to express what was best for them and this was about making choices concerning what they wanted to do in their daily life. Ariane responded, "As long as I am able to stay in my house in the countryside. I've always had faith in the Lord. I find that I have a nice life. I'm the master of my life!" Some women clearly indicated that it was their choice to remain in a rural community, explaining that older people have more options nowadays with regard to staying at home or moving into an apartment. Not so long ago, these choices were not available to them. They had to stay where they were because no other avenue was possible, which is quite the opposite now, according to these women.

Other women also wanted to be able to decide for themselves, as declared by

Marie-Line:

If the time comes when I am not able to take care of myself anymore, not able to go to the washroom by myself and I get dirty, I'll go to a nursing home. There'll be nurses that'll take care of me.

Marie-Line wanted to decide on her own terms when it would be time to leave her home.

For Noémie, leaving her house was not, in her mind, a good option: "I don't see myself in a small apartment and having nothing to do. Time would go by so slowly. I wouldn't feel at home."

Even though the women clearly explained their preference for remaining in their home because it made them happier, it was not surprising that they often felt ignored and not respected for their decision to live alone. They frequently lived with the pressure of social opinions about older women living by themselves. Marie-Line explained that her daughter often asked her to move in with her. She said her daughter asks her on a regular basis. Marie-Line does not want to move in with her daughter because she is happy where she lives for now. Véronique, too, mentioned that she would stay in her home as long as she could, but also expressed feeling an obligation to justify why she was still in her home. It was as if these women were not doing the right thing in the eyes of their family and members of the community. They were fighting against these opinions by constantly justifying their choices to stay in their home and their community.

Moreover, the participants felt the weight of having to leave their environment one day, but as long as they could remain where they felt at home, they would stay even if the social pressure kept pushing them to leave: “If I went to go live somewhere else, I’d miss my home because I have my way of living, and if I go to someone else’s home, they have their way of living” (Marie-Line). Participants stayed where they were because it was what they wanted, not because they had no options. Natasha said she saw it as a matter of choice: “We old folks are fine because we do what we want. Well, I’m fine here in my home. I can’t ask for better. So why go to look for better if you’re fine?” This choice was expressed by most of the participants during their interview. Choosing to live where they wanted mattered to them. Marie-Line expressed this point of view: “If I left here, I’d miss it. I’d miss my home. I’d miss being free. I don’t have worries here. I don’t have concerns here.” They felt a sense of control in the environment where they lived.

Participants stated that if they listened to what others were telling them about their daily life or if they were doing what others wanted them to do, they would feel less in control of their life. Marie-Line explained:

My daughter tells me, “Mom, come live with me.” No, I’m good at home. Here, in my home, I have no one that tells me, “Come eat! Go wash up! Make your bed!”, all those things. When I want to make my bed, I do it, I don’t need anyone to tell me to make my bed.

The feeling of being at home with their belongings brought them comfort. As Natasha said, “I’m more at ease staying in my house.” Clearly, independence is of the utmost importance to them. They lived their life as they wanted to, and no one could claim that they were unhappy. They did not need much to be content, and what they had was enough. The choice of staying where they are was associated with owning their house, living alone, feeling independent and looking after themselves. These were the most important aspects of their experience as older women. Their descriptions of living alone helped to explain the reason why they made such a choice. They did not hesitate to mention that they were happy, even if people assumed the opposite. For Josée, being happy was described in this way: “What I have, I do appreciate. So, for me, living here, it’s not difficult. When you have a telephone, you’re not all alone. I would even say that the telephone is my best friend.”

Noémie stated that her daily life includes doing a lot of activities that keep her busy: “I have my own garden. I pick the vegetables and I prepare them for wintertime. My garden and my cooking keep me busy.” Janelle remarked that painting, exercising and walking keep her busy. Zoé, meanwhile, picks berries during the summertime and writes in her journal, so she feels independent. Another woman said that all the cooking she does for her children and grandchildren makes her happy. As Marie-Line explained,

“I have just what’s necessary to feel good. I’m good.” Their statements communicate a clear message: they are happy with their current lives, especially living in their home, even as challenges arise.

5.1.5 Being Satisfied with Their Lives Despite Daily Challenges

At first glance, the daily lives of these women appear to be full of satisfaction. However, they are imbued with negative perceptions from the outside. What they find satisfying about their life is quite the opposite of what is projected onto them by others. They must constantly bear the weight of negative perceptions when they go out into their community. However, participants said they were very satisfied with their life: “I’ve had many, and I mean many, hardships, but now, I couldn’t have a nicer life than the one I have now” (Marie-Claude). Along the same lines, Zoé explained, “When I go to bed at night, I plan my day. I say I cannot wait until tomorrow; I plan my day.” These women felt a sense of accomplishment with their life and about aging and, overall, maintained a positive philosophy about their lived experiences. Véronique noted, “I am better at 75 than I was in my 20s or 30s, that’s for sure!” As Noémie said, “Aging isn’t frightening.” They did not compare themselves to others, but instead looked back fondly at their life history. They told themselves not to have regrets about life, but rather to learn from it. Marie-Line said, “I tell myself, it’s a spinning wheel, when it gets to the end of each person, well then, it’s time to go.”

The women in this study defined themselves and their age in this manner: “I am having a good life,” or “I am aging, and it doesn’t bother me,” explaining that the more they advanced in age, the more comfortable they became with the idea of aging. In the words of Geneviève; “Yes, I’m well. My mother passed away at 96 years old, and she said that it was the others who were old.” Getting old allowed them, in a way, to be at

peace with everything around them. Cloé said, “I live a nice life. I’m getting older and it doesn’t bother me. It’ll be done when it’s done. I’ll go join the others up there. I’m not scared of getting older.” Also, they associated the notion of satisfaction with being well as an older woman. Zoé insisted, “I can’t speak for every aged woman, but for me it is true that I live a good life.” Cloé also enjoyed her daily life, remarking “I’m not scared of aging. Life could not be better. I’m by myself and I do what I want.”

These women expressed themselves as being grateful for the way in which they are aging, as Véronique indicated:

I don’t find it difficult, getting older. For a woman, getting older, it’s like my mother used to say, we all have our turn. We can’t stay young forever. We change all the time. We are lucky that we become wiser as we age.

Some women mentioned minor issues with regard to their health (cataracts, arthritis, etc.), but they did not make this topic a central part of their conversation. Furthermore, it did not make them reconsider living in their home by themselves. They spoke openly about having health problems: “When we age, we lose bits and pieces” (Zoé). Annabelle explained that it is not because she is older that she is not like anybody else. She said, “As long as I am well, I can’t see why I’d be any less than another person”. The participants did not dwell on their health, although Valérie recounted how she had experienced health problems when she was young. The doctors could not discover what she was suffering from, and she spent many months in the hospital. She said that at that time medical practice was not as advanced as it is today. Otherwise, few of the women talked about their health, and those who did had very little to say. Most of their current health problems consisted of occasional feelings of depression.

Some women did find some days harder and more depressing than others. However, they tended to start projects to help them through difficult days. A few women

experienced loneliness: “Life is more depressing since my husband died. Getting old is harder now that he is not with me anymore. But I have my family; family is the most important thing on earth” (Janie). The women who mentioned feeling lonely were not ashamed to talk about it. It was a normal phase to go through that was part of life. These women found ways to get through hard times, but they did not hide the fact that living alone could sometimes be difficult. While Janelle found aging boring, she explained that as an older woman, she had to find activities to do and not to wait for others to organize her days. She said:

The best way to live your daily life for a woman my age is having a project when you get up in the morning. Today, I’m going to do this and that. You must get up in the morning and have projects. Not having projects, you become depressed.

Only three women mentioned they were receiving support and help with their household chores. For them, it was not an essential part of their lives. Mylène expressed it this way, “Oh! Yes, by the way: I have help from a support worker.” Some of them faced a few challenges, but they had strategies to overcome them. For example, they had family members who helped in different ways such as doing house repairs and driving them to appointments. The women looked back at what they had done and where they were now with a sense of pride. They reviewed their accomplishments: working hard all their life, being married at a very young age, and raising a large family. They pictured themselves as women who had overcome many barriers and limitations due to challenging circumstances in their lives. Now that these difficulties were behind them, they felt satisfaction. Marie-Line explained, “I’ve had many hardships, but I got through it. Hardships aren’t what kill people.”

The women talked about the challenges they faced in their daily lives. They were proud of the fact that they still lived by themselves in their own home. They often spoke

about motherhood, raising children, taking care of others and themselves. They did not find their lived experiences diminished because they lived alone in their home, despite what they heard from the people around them. On the contrary, they saw them as an asset, because growing up and living life as a woman meant that they felt strong, and all their experiences helped them to live alone and to take care of themselves. These women did not hesitate to express their satisfaction with their daily lives in a rural setting despite the insinuations made about them and their homes. The benefits of owning their own home and living by themselves had a tremendous influence on their daily life.

5.1.6 Being in Control of Their Lives and Living Independently

Most of the women saw their lives as being satisfying because where they lived now was where they wanted to be. They saw their experience as a journey they were happy to be on. Being lonely did not fit into their narrative. For example, during the interview with Véronique, she asked if I wanted to see some of the things she had created. She said, “Would you like to see the project I am doing now?” She showed me her paintings, some of which decorated her walls. At the end of our interview, Véronique commented:

I don't know if I represent the norm, but I can live alone. I always have projects. I don't find my life difficult; I must accept that I am alone. I've always told myself that there are other people who live all alone, so I can do it as well.

This description of daily life was linked to being alone. Interestingly, the notion of living alone came up repeatedly and was often described as being a positive experience. The women felt in control of their lives because they live alone, commenting, “I like it like that” (Cloé); “I live alone, and I like it” (Marie-Claude). In fact, Marie-Claude talked at length about her satisfaction with what she possessed: “I never lived in luxury, but we don't need luxury to be happy”. Similarly, Annabelle stated, “Living in my house

is like living in paradise.” This sense of control was central during the interviews. It was as if participants were defending their decision to live independently. The participants did not hesitate to say that living in their house gave them a sense of control over their daily lives. They pointed out that being able to decide what they wanted to do in the morning when they woke up was important. By staying in their home, they controlled their daily lives, and this brought them gratitude for being able to live in their own home.

For these participants, being in control meant that they remained where they wanted to be, and it was what they desired the most. They spent time talking about the state of their houses because they felt it was important to counter the opinion of others that they should leave their homes, as expressed in their stories, and they defied society’s definition of them as “lonely” older women, bored with being alone. Janelle exclaimed, “I don’t have an inferiority complex because I’m old.”

Indeed, the women expressed strong feelings about their life. Janelle affirmed with self-confidence, “I’m in paradise, here in this little house.” Marie-Line also described how well she felt and how good life was for her now that she was 89 years old: “At my age, I have a nice life. I take care of myself. I wear jewelry. I put on skin cream, and I like that. I love getting ready to go out.” She was grateful that she could still do the things she liked even if she did not go out as often as she would have liked to. For example, to prepare herself for our interview, she wore jewelry and makeup. The women’s happiness was intertwined with the fact they were still living in their house so they could decide what to do with their days.

Thus, home meant many things to these women, such as control and freedom. For women such as Cloé, this brought them a great deal of satisfaction: “I’m happy, I’m

well, and I don't ask for anything better. I don't complain because I am satisfied with my life. If I want to go out, I do it. I talk on the phone, I read, I watch the news." This description of their daily life contradicts what society says about aging individuals who live alone. Often, people assume that older people's daily life is not positive and that they are lonely and depressed. While many women do not feel that way, they must still deconstruct images of the poor and frail older person living alone and isolated. The women in this study gave examples to illustrate that there is a powerful, positive side to being an older woman living by herself. For instance Cloé declared: "I couldn't be better! I'm by myself and I do what I want. I really love it, being all alone". Those two criteria, living alone and being in control, characterized the women's experience of living in their home. Another aspect tied to these notions was that of living independently as an older woman.

Participants experienced pressure from others who reminded them constantly that they must be very unhappy to be alone in their home. They did not hesitate to claim that it was because they were women that people around them kept trying to persuade them to leave their home, assuming that it must be difficult to be a woman living alone. However, for the participants, living independently was a crucial part of their lived experiences as older women. As was mentioned, Zoé does not live alone, but she considers herself to be an older woman who is independent even though she lives with family. While the women faced some challenges in living independently, they were able to overcome them by accepting and giving support. However, many participants felt they had to defend their decision to live independently as an older woman.

5.2. Facing Challenges of Living Independently

Despite expressing overall satisfaction about their living situation, some participants raised some difficulties related to living alone as an older woman. These included taking care of outside chores. They explained that if they still had their husbands with them, it would be easier to get these chores done. Many of them spoke about the state of their property and commented that being alone meant that it was harder to take care of everything. Mylène stated:

A woman who lives by herself, it's difficult to take care of everything. The lawn, the snow, it's more difficult for a woman. A man, he can just take care of things like the maintenance. It's less difficult for him to take care of the outside of the house.

In this excerpt, Marie-Line recognizes the work traditionally done according to one's gender. While the participants explained that it was not difficult to take care of the chores inside the house, for some, those outdoor chores constituted an aspect of their daily life they found more difficult. They attributed this to the physical strength required to perform these tasks outside the home. Marie-Line said, "Yes, it's different for a woman because I don't have a man's strength. If I could go outside and cut down trees, I would do it." The women did not feel overly burdened when it came to taking care of the house and approached this role as they had always done. Most of the women enjoyed this role because they felt like experts. However, the outside chores, which were generally perceived to be men's work, became a burden for some of them. Josée mentioned:

It's not like when you have your husband and, well, he can take care of the things that break in the house and fix them or, well, he knows who to ask to get them fixed. That's what I find difficult, especially managing all the repairs on the house. It's a lot of responsibility when you're all alone.

A second challenge was money. The financial dimension was more difficult for the participants because they were living on one income now, as opposed to having had a double income to pay the bills. Mylène explained, “It’s difficult to make ends meet sometimes.” This difficulty led some women to think about leaving their homes. In fact, some of them were thinking of selling the house in the near future. However, this thought saddened them because they wanted to live there as long as possible. None of them indicated that they wished to sell their homes due to poor health. Rather, it was the outside maintenance and the cost of maintaining their homes on a single income that were the reasons why some of them were thinking about selling their home: “It’s difficult because it’s expensive to live here alone. Especially in winter, the heating is expensive and so is having your driveway plowed” (Noémie). Janelle agreed: “When you are living on one income, it is financially difficult to take care of a house.” The participants determined that it was primarily the financial challenges they faced daily that led them to think about whether they should stay in their home or leave it.

5.2.1 Defending Their Ability to Live Independently as an Older Woman and Being Able to Recognize New Forms of Support

The women interviewed felt that living independently led them to not only accept support from family and members of the community, but also to give support to others. Even though they considered themselves to be independent, they were aware that they had to accept support, but they also explained the ways in which they provided support for others. This two-way relation constituted their support network. The women also described one support in particular that made them feel part of the community: the support that most of the time goes unnoticed, such as a smile or a “hello”. Furthermore, their life experiences provided them with tools to build support and to learn how to

accept it. During the interviews, participants emphasized the support system that exists in their rural communities. They felt it was important to describe how people in their community help them, but also the actions they themselves take to help others. One such support consisted of simple gestures or words. This form of support is less well recognized, but they talked about it at length.

The women described specific kinds of support which was not clearly visible within the community, but that took the form of an underground network. They provided many examples of this support. Joanie noted:

The man who delivers my newspaper in the winter, when he puts it on the patio, he'll sound his car horn once to let me know that my newspaper is at my door. He doesn't do that in the summer, just in the winter. If I don't hear the car horn, I don't have to go outside to see if my newspaper is there. Also, he told me that in doing that, he knows every day that I'm all right, because my newspaper isn't there when he comes by the next day to deliver the new one.

Small gestures such as these show the closeness and forms of help that exist in rural settings. Annabelle explained, "Friendships with people. When I couldn't find a place to stay, people told me that I couldn't go away. I felt that there was a connection. They helped me find a house". These examples illustrate the concern rural community members have for one another. In fact, many community members would go the extra mile to find out if an individual needed help with something. Marie-Line illustrated this:

People come to get me every Sunday to go to church. Pastoral support comes to visit me once a month. For example, the other time, a man and a woman called me to see if I wanted to go to vote with them. I said, 'of course, I'm going to go vote'. They came to pick me up.

This kindness from people was more than a mere "Hello, how are you today?" Many participants said that they maintained close ties with other community members whom they already knew. The women in this study expressed how these little gestures helped them to remain in their home because they felt supported and cared for as a

person even though they lived alone. For them, it was important to be able to count on people, not only for help to remain in their home, but also, to feel that people thought about them. This gave them strength to remain longer in their community. This support system was made up of people who took care of each other without their having to ask for help. Such a support system within the community had great significance for the participants who received it. This support had an impact on their day-to-day lives. Individuals took the time to care for others around them, and this care and friendship provided a feeling of belonging to the community even if the women did not volunteer or were not as active as they would have liked to be. This support network made the daily life of the participants pleasant.

While this support mainly consisted of small gestures, it let participants know that they could count on help from their community when they needed it. Joanie said, “We’re treated well in the countryside. The man who plows my driveway even offered to come help if I needed support at night. It’s good to hear when people offer to help.” These gestures represent an acknowledgment of the women’s place in the community, but more significantly, such gestures helped them to feel good about their community. These people fostered a strong connection that united them as community members in a rural region. The women appreciated these gestures in their daily life. Joanie indicated, “When you’re all alone, you depend on others. We need others.”

The women networked with others who offered their help and with people they know well who gave them support. However, the support is not merely one-sided, because the women also gave support to others. For example, Marie-Claude explained that she had a neighbour who helped her when she needed it, and so Marie-Claude, in return, would call her on Sundays to ask if she could drive her to church. She said, “I tell

her you don't need to take your car; I will pick you up, and you will come with me to church." These gestures were part of their daily life. It was important that they helped and supported each other. This part of their routine brought them a sense of purpose and enriched the lives of others. Geneviève explained how this support was mutual when she said:

My neighbour, a man in his sixties. He's not much more than 60. If he leaves for a few days, he calls me to ask me to keep an eye on his house. And I ask him the same thing if I leave for a few days. If I need help, he comes to help me.

It was often the small gestures that made these women feel appreciated rather than old and not contributing to society anymore. The support received by these women contributed to their quality of life. Josée said:

I have good friends. A very good friend calls me all the time when she goes to do errands to ask me if I want to go with her. That kind of support helps me very much to stay here.

These women felt the kindness manifested, in simple gestures and words, by other members of the community. Ariane explained:

If we need something, we go to the grocery store. Even if I'm capable of doing my things, the employees are nice, they hurry when they put my bags in my cart, they help me. For example, during the holidays, my children always come here for three weeks, and it's also during my birthday and, well, my children go to the grocery store and they tell the employees that it's my birthday and, well, those employees take the time to write "Happy Birthday" on the cash receipt. They're all very nice.

This support did not only occur as a response to an emergency or an immediate need, but it also appeared naturally as an automatic impulse of care. The people in their community were generous not only because the other person needed help, but because they cared about her well-being. Ariane mentioned, "The other day, someone came to bring me a bucket of mackerel. She called and said, 'I'll never be able to get rid of all this, do you want some mackerel?'" I witnessed a similar situation during one interview.

We were talking about things that mattered to the woman I was interviewing when someone suddenly knocked at her door. She opened the door and saw a woman who was bringing her vegetables from her garden. The woman said, “I was passing by and I thought you would like some.” This example illustrates the kinds of gestures that create bonds between individuals in rural communities.

The women in this study defined support not only in terms of services received or needs fulfilled, but as an expression of solidarity between people who know each other. This was part of daily life in a rural community: “Oh, at the store, I get there, they all know me and help me. The employees even know my membership number at that grocery store” (Zoé). For these women, it is important that people know each other and share proximity and closeness which help them appreciate life on a day-to-day basis. Cloé noted, “We know all our neighbours, we know everyone, we have plenty of visits. For me, there’s a lot of it here in the summer.” It was common for participants to receive support without even asking for something, just because they knew each other. As Annabelle indicated:

If she sees my car there, suddenly, she comes over with dinner. They’re very generous. They bring lobster, I never buy lobster, and fish as well. And that’s not all they give me, and they offer—“If you need anything, you call me.”

According to the participants, community members in rural areas helped without expecting any favour in return. This builds bonds between one another. People were comfortable offering help to their neighbours and receiving services from others. However, to accept a service from others, it was important for them to know and trust the person beforehand. Most of the women described the support system within their community as existing in large part because people knew each other. That closeness

brought comfort and safety, and it was important to establish that relationship before letting others enter their home and their life. Mylène stated:

I have friends that take me bowling or to Moncton with them. The people around help us. If we need something, we can call them. People help each other out. Everyone knows each other here and supports one another. It's like a family, my friends are here. You know that if you need something you have friends whom you can depend on. You know that there's always someone there to help you.

For these women, it has taken an entire lifetime to develop their support network in their community. While some women made new friends later in life, these new friendships still developed within their inner circle through activities organized by the golden age clubs where new members might participate. They became friends because they had the opportunity to get to know each other within their established rural community. Mylène explained it this way: "All the activities I participate in, they help me make new friends." The women often described at length the types of support which helped them to remain in their rural community.

Also, the informal support really helps me to stay here. It greatly helps me as well when people continuously tell me to call them if I need help. Not to be shy and just call them, that they're there. All this informal help gives me the strength and the courage to stay by myself at home. I love my house and my countryside. (Josée)

For Josée, another important aspect of living by herself was being able to call someone when she needed something or to receive phone calls to check on her. According to her, in rural settings, people did not feel ashamed to ask for assistance. Similarly, Marie-Claude said:

In the countryside, we all know each other. We're not worried about going to the neighbours and knocking on the door, borrow a cup of sugar. We're not afraid to go, we're not ashamed to go. They're not going to close the door in your face. People try to help each other.

All the women described at length how important others were to them. Participants such as Marie-Line took the time to give examples to illustrate the informal help they

received, such as people picking them up to go to mass on Sundays. Marie-Line explained, “There are people that come to get me to go to church on Sundays. They come every Sunday. If I can’t go to mass, I call them.” These moments in their lives were the focus of our discussions and formed the greater part, if not the entirety, of some of the interviews. The women repeatedly described how the presence of individuals in their surroundings was crucial for them to stay in their community. Valerie explained how she appreciated the telephone calls she received from her sister since the death of her husband three years ago. She said, “My sister calls me every night, seven days a week. She doesn’t miss one night” (Valerie). The human presence helped her to feel that someone was there for her. This small gesture was a meaningful part of Valerie’s daily life. She noted, “I wait for her call every night because I know she will call. I even said that to my doctor, and he couldn’t believe it.” This informal support is not always visible, but it contributes immensely to the daily happiness of these women and involves interdependence, which helps them remain in their community longer.

The women interpreted positively the gestures of others who came forward to help them. This part of their lived experiences has certainly influenced their feelings about living in a rural setting. The women talked at length about the joys of being in a rural setting. Marie-Line said, “I’m not lonely. I have people who call me at night. I have plenty of calls in the evening. The friends of the parish call me, my children as well.” The women in this study made sure to express the positive aspects of the support received and given. During interviews, some women loudly emphasized how important it was for people to care about members of their community. It was as if they wanted everyone to hear them. It was not surprising that they also highlighted how their family members help them to stay in their home and in their community.

In contrast, one aspect rarely addressed during the interviews was the formal support the women received. This type of support is often perceived by many, especially by those individuals who do not live in rural settings, as the main form of support that older people need most urgently or would request first. However, none of the women in this study put any emphasis on that aspect. It was not an important feature of their lived experiences. Mylène said in passing: “Oh by the way, I receive formal support at home.” While she mentioned the homemaker service that she received, she chose to describe the informal support she received in greater detail than the formal support that helped her remain in her home. Responding to the question, “What helps you to stay in your community?” the participants highlighted all the gestures, phone calls and help offered by others, or in other words, the informal support. The participants described other forms of support and how they responded to them.

5.2.2 Being Able to Accept and Give Support

Most of the women described the support and assistance they receive from their family as an essential component that allowed them to stay in their homes. This support manifests itself in many forms. Noémie noted, “I use wood for heating, and it’s fortunate that my children help me with the wood. It helps me to stay here.” She saw this help as crucial because she could not consider living in her home for another winter without it. It was not the quantity of services that seemed important to these women, but more the way the service was delivered. Mylène explained, “Fortunately, my son helps me to stay here. I think that without this I couldn’t get by. Even though he doesn’t live here, he helps me take care of the house, and he always asks if there’s anything I need.” Again, the gesture of offering support, even though her son lives an hour outside the

community, helped Mylène to feel good about being in her home. The mere offer of support allowed these women to decide whether to stay or not in their home. Joanie said:

My children, between them, they help me. If it weren't for my children, I wouldn't be here. My children, that's the reason why I stay. I'm happy that the children come. I've always lived here, and if they keep helping me, I'll stay here.

Other members of their family also help these women to keep on living at home. It was important to know that they could count on someone when they needed them.

Janelle explained:

My brothers and sisters live close to me. We're close. If I need help, they're there, but this winter, I had help, plenty of help. My extended family came this winter to shovel my patio steps, and someone plowed my driveway twice a day last winter. You know that there's always someone to help you in case of an emergency.

Some of them talked about the challenges in accepting support because they did not want to bother others or be a burden. They wanted to remain independent, but they also realized they had to accept support from people who really wanted to help them. It was important to recognize this struggle for the participants who wished to remain independent.

The participants had to be resourceful because they lived alone. They knew how to organize and plan. They were not dependent; they had developed resources to live alone in their homes. They strongly believed in their ability to fend for themselves. Véronique said, "I do everything myself. And, when my children come to visit me, I make a list of little things that need to be fixed." The women were in control of their daily decisions.

Even the two women who lived with their children emphasised their ability to live independently. Natasha explained:

The reason I'm here with my two children, I need them, and they need me. Oh, we're comfortable. We help each other. If I were alone, I wouldn't like it. I wouldn't stay here alone.

All of the women accepted support from their families, and they were grateful for it. Accepting support did not mean that personal choices were not important in their daily life. In fact, if they did not like their lives, they wanted to be able to make changes.

Zoé said:

It's been three years that I'm with my son and his wife. I decided to move in with them. We help each other. I make suppers, so they don't have to worry about the suppers because they work. I also do a lot of cooking for them, and they do the rest of the chores.

For the women in this study, reciprocity was important. They acknowledged that they received support from others, but they also gave a lot in return (e.g., making meals, making toys for grandchildren, etc.). They felt pleasure in knowing that they still contributed by helping others. Valerie, for example, said, "I gave my car to a member of my family, and she drives me where I want to go." Too often, this type of family support, either close or distant, has not been recognized for its true value in studies or public policies concerning older people who wish to live in their own home. However, the women in this study emphasized the importance of daily mutual support and assistance.

The women expressed what it meant to them to live as older women and why it mattered to be a contributing member of a community and their families. This support, on both sides, helped to establish a form of mutual assistance which continues today. This rich contribution to rural communities improves the life of older women living in these settings. Mutual assistance was of great value to these women. They were proud to

say that, as community members, they received help but also helped others. Even though well supported, the women still experienced other challenges related to living alone.

5.3 What Living in Rural Communities Means

Another component that was discussed in depth with the women was their rural communities and what it was like to live in those regions. The participants did not hesitate to elaborate on the topic. It was an important part of their lived experience. They looked for support to enable them to stay in their home, but this was not always easy because of major changes around them. Because they had remained in the same place for so long, they could rely on others, and others on them reciprocally. Participants elaborated on the newcomers who are changing the face of their communities and the reasons why they would never move to a city. To better explain these notions, they compared rural life with urban life.

When I first asked the question about living in a rural setting, Ariane immediately said, “I wish a long life for the aging population in a rural community!” Participants talked about their life experience in terms of attachment to their community. They said that living in a rural area meant experiencing a quality of life that they could not find elsewhere. Living in these communities meant that the women were immersed in their language and culture. However, according to the participants, major changes have transformed the face of rurality; it is not like before. They felt left out because they lived in rural areas, not because they are older. Rural communities have been ignored by leaders, government officials and decision makers.

The women in this study talked about the responsibility of government and the engagement of their communities with regard to the care of their aging population. They

believed that if society cared more about older women in rural settings, it would take concrete measures to ensure older women's ability to remain in their communities.

5.3.1 Being Neglected as a Rural Community

Many of the participants felt a sense of betrayal and neglect on the basis of their age. They also believed that when older people voiced their opinions about what they needed, the government did not listen to them. Josée stated that if government officials had listened to older people, they would have provided help to enable the older population to remain in their home as long as they could. She added that older women want to stay in their home. Furthermore, the women all strongly expressed their wish not to move into a nursing home because they were afraid to go there: "If I had to go into a nursing home, it would kill me" (Josée). For Josée reiterated her belief that the government does not listen to the aging population and their needs: "The government doesn't listen to seniors. It should listen to them and give them aid around the house and that would help them stay in their homes longer. That's what we want, us, to stay in our home" (Josée). These women provided explanations about what they would like to see happen, but stressed that the government did not consider what they said because they live in a rural community. For instance, Annabelle was convinced that the government did not treat rural communities well. In her volunteer work, she observed the way the government did not listen to the people who lived in rural settings. She noted:

Of course, we're in a place where we don't have all the commodities. We're in a place where we're far from everything, where we don't have much of a voice, especially when we're in a small community, it's even worse. We're a small community here. When we wanted to fight to keep the *Caisse Populaire* [Credit Union], we didn't have a voice. And then we don't have many organizations to defend us. There's a lack of agencies, there's a lack of organization from all points of view.

Some of the women also strongly believed that rural communities are ignored by the government because people there are less educated and because the population is declining at a rapid pace. This contributed to the lack of advocacy by community members or leaders to defend their right to continue living there. Annabelle indicated, “The government should take care of small communities because we have a right to live. We have an earthly paradise here, but don’t have big industries ... so we’re forgotten here.”

Since most of the public services were typically found in places with a denser population, these women felt as if they had been abandoned. Annabelle said, “We are the forgotten. We were not defended. We’re not born to live in poverty, but there’s no one to defend us. We must organize ourselves by ourselves, but we don’t know who to talk to. We have nothing.” The women in this study had something meaningful to contribute with regard to aging, but often felt belittled. Annabelle explained how she felt:

What saddens me here, and in other rural communities, is that we take advantage of people who can’t defend themselves and don’t have the means to do it either, or they don’t have the education to do that sort of thing. Instead, they should organize something so that those people can do it.

Annabelle said it was evident that rural communities were neglected. She was convinced that because rural communities had fewer people, many of whom were aged, the government did not want to invest in them. Annabelle strongly believed that even if the services were available in some rural communities, the population would not be treated in the same way as communities with a higher concentration of people. She offered this opinion:

The government is not going to shut down a hospital in a place where people speak up loud and where there is a large population, they're going to be really careful. They go to places where the people can't defend themselves, and the government put its money somewhere else.

The participants also believed that the media does not treat them well, notably with their inaccurate portrayals of the lives of the aging population. Marie-Claude stated that the media fostered perceptions that older people could not do well by themselves, which, of course, was not true for her. Moreover, she believed that the media tended to ignore older people and render them invisible to the world. She explained:

The media, I don't find they speak well about us. Sometimes, it's like we're not worth much. It's as if people think that the aging population cannot manage all alone, but that's not true. I'm happy that you're interested in older people. Older people, it's as if we're there but we are not being noticed. (Marie-Claude)

Most participants were aware of the negative images used to describe both aging and rural people. They hated that their views were ignored. Several women firmly believed that the aging population in rural communities has important points of view that are worth listening to.

The women shared their points of view about how government and the media treated the aging population. They also explained how the community could do more for its older residents, such as providing more activities to meet their needs. Geneviève spoke for many when she remarked, "There could be more activities for older people. Here, there aren't many activities for us, only bingo, and I don't like it that much." Annabelle also spoke about the need for more activities and better services. She said, "There are no activities for us. It's not very lively. It's an aging community because the youth don't stay here. There's no school, there's no work. There are very few social activities, so the days can seem longer sometimes." Janelle added that the community was "a little boring. There are not many things to do." To illustrate the extent to which

some communities were losing services and were not able to meet the needs of their community members, Annabelle said:

We don't have a Caisse Populaire [Credit Union]. We lost it. We just have an ATM where we withdraw money, but we can't even deposit it. We have a Co-op that we could lose any time. We have no school. We have a church that needs repairs, but we can't do anything because we don't have the money. We're going to demolish the rectory.

Geneviève commented, "Maybe more help in the house, because there aren't many apartments for elderly people here in my community. There's just one and it's expensive." For others, the lack of transportation was a major barrier that could prevent them from staying in their home for a few more years. Mylène explained, "It's rather difficult, especially the transportation. Especially when you have to go see the doctor." It was difficult to have to ask for rides when they needed them: "When the time comes, I'm forced to ask for a ride because I need to go to my appointments or go running errands. I find it hard to ask" (Valerie). Valerie's statement reflected the sentiment of the other participants when they had to ask for rides. This was when they felt the most uncomfortable asking for help.

The women also strongly believed that more activities were needed with regard to their social life in the community. To combat the absence of social activities, they suggested that housing and transportation, for example, could enhance their daily life and allow them to remain in their homes. The participants were able to identify other negative aspects of remaining longer in their rural community, such as having few activities for their age group. However, despite this, they still organized themselves so that their daily life was pleasant. They explained that they could count on others for help to access activities organized by other older women. Thus, even if they were witnessing many changes in their rural area, they continued to rely on the generosity of people to

feel good about remaining in their home. They still found that living in a rural setting compensated for the lack of activities and the changes in population, and were still convinced that where they live is the best place to be and that rural communities are good places to live even if they are facing challenges.

5.3.2 Facing Challenges With Newcomers

Another aspect of living in rural communities that these women brought up repeatedly when discussing daily life was the changes taking place in their communities. One of the major changes was the arrival of newcomers in their community—people they did not know. Living in a remote setting creates unique situations that must be overcome as one ages. The participants who needed help mentioned that they found it hard to ask for help from these newcomers. This provoked major changes for these women who were used to living in a place where the same people had lived together for a long time. The women did not know the newcomers, who were unfamiliar faces to them. In such an environment, they found it increasingly hard to ask for support if they need it.

The participants indicated that knowing their neighbours was a very important aspect of their daily life. This brought a sense of satisfaction to their day-to-day routine. They genuinely enjoyed familiar faces and knowing their neighbours. As this situation gradually changed in their immediate surroundings, it became difficult to come to terms with the fact that the face of their community was changing. They saw this change negatively because these new, unfamiliar faces brought significant changes to their daily routines. More precisely, these changes influenced the way they perceived mutual aid. Josée said, “There’s still mutual support, but it’s harder to see. For example, it’s more difficult to ask for or offer help because we don’t know certain neighbours.”

According to some participants, the new members of the community did not want to be bothered by others. Mylène provided the following examples to illustrate her opinion: “They don’t socialize with us. We don’t see them outside. We don’t know them.” This contrasts with previous years when everyone in their community helped one another. This tradition had gone on for many years. Geneviève also lamented that things had changed: “We don’t know our neighbours anymore.” This change in rural composition was a serious issue for the women, most of whom mentioned it at least once during the interviews. It was not the lack of services or the decrease in population that bothered them, but rather how the practice of helping each other was changing because of an influx of newcomers into the community. They observed that the desire to help each other was less common among the new neighbours who moved to these rural settings.

The participants indicated that now, they had to carefully select whom they were going to ask for help. They preferred to ask individuals who were pleased to give assistance rather than those who felt obligated to help. Now, they were more reluctant to ask for a service. As Josée noted when talking about newcomers, “It’s like these days, people don’t want to help. They only look after themselves and their little things. They don’t want to be bothered by others. So, we help those we know the most.” The new face of rurality not only changed how neighbours help each other, but it was also difficult to adapt to the new habits those people brought when they came to live in their communities. Josée also highlighted how this general trend of helping others was not as common as it used to be.

Newcomers were moving to rural settings and bringing different customs. According to the participants, these newcomers had different habits, and long-time

residents were unfamiliar with them. For example, some newcomers did not turn on their lights outside at night when they were at home. Some women interpreted this as a sign that the residents of such houses did not want to be bothered. Even though these habits were different, the women tried to understand their meaning. Mylène conveyed her thoughts and her understanding in this way:

People aren't as close to one another now. What I find that changed the most, I think it's to save money, but it's so dark outside at night now. Before that, there would be lights in all the houses. Now, in the evening, you look outside and there are no lights like there once were. For example, there [house in front], there's never any light there. I don't know if they're there or not. So, I wouldn't dare go ask for help because I don't know if they're home. There's less light inside the houses and even outside the houses.

Such changes brought challenges for residents of rural communities who had been living in these areas for the greater part of their life. It was hard to establish connections with their neighbours. Mylène said, "The people, ... they don't participate in community activities. We don't know them. They could mix with us [but they don't]." These new habits created a distance between neighbours. Marie-Line explained:

The difference now is the people that come from elsewhere, we don't know them. My neighbour comes from another province, it's been three years that he's there and I've never seen him. I don't know them. They work in the lobster plant. They don't go out and they don't mingle. I'd rather have no neighbours than have neighbours I don't know.

Marie-Line clearly conveyed the challenge of having people in the community who did not interact with their neighbours. The women stated how as a result, they found it challenging to reach out for help.

This social distance left the women feeling a sense of disappointment. They missed the closeness that was previously present, but which was now gradually disappearing. Marie-Claude explained, "There's less mutual support. We each have our own life. But we can't say that we live our own life and that we don't need others. We

can't say that." Some participants also felt disappointed that gestures of mutual aid once present were now fading away. According to them, these gestures helped build a strong community and now this support structure was starting to crumble. Furthermore, the way people interacted with their neighbours changed the way mutual support was perceived.

The participants had to reassess certain habits they themselves had now that their community had begun to change. Despite changes, the participants still believed in the importance of giving and receiving help and services. They relied on this support to be able to stay in their environment. For them, this was the cornerstone of rurality. While such support had always been present in their community, many changes in their daily lives were having an impact on the networks of support. The newcomers' arrival would result in new ways of doing things in the community.

The participants were profoundly affected by these changes. The face of rurality was being transformed little by little due to the new residents' different habits and ways of living, some newcomers coming from Ontario or as far away as Germany. Josée commented on the new community members by saying, "The newcomers, they only look after themselves and their things. They don't want to be bothered by others."

The old familiarity with the people who surrounded them in their daily lives played a significant role when accepting and giving help. Not knowing their neighbours created a certain distance between them. It felt odd to live among strangers in their own community. Before the community began its transformation, the women in this study did not question whether aid would be offered when they needed it. Since everyone knew each other, everyone helped each other. However, the changes resulted in many of them reflecting on the meaning of those changes. New faces in rural communities brought

new ways of doing things. Indeed, these new ways changed many rural habits. Despite this, the women continued to help others, and as such, it remained an important part of what rurality meant to them. Nonetheless, the arrival of newcomers resulted in these women's seeking help only from those whom they knew well. Josée said, "We all know each other, and we mutually support each other because we know each other. When we all know each other, it's easier to support each other."

Even as the women mourned the changes that were occurring in their communities, they also highlighted the mutual support that still took place in their lives and made them happy. They said they wanted to preserve that closeness among people within their communities. Most of the participants elaborated on the close ties in their lives which provided a source of mutual support. However, they did not develop such ties with newcomers.

Not only did the recent arrivals bring new habits to their communities, but the lifelong inhabitants also adopted new habits. The participants noticed that people visited each other less. According to Mylène, "Neighbours don't visit each other as often as in the past. I think it's because people have more cars now, they go out more, so they visit less than before. People aren't as close to one another now." Many of the participants noted people in the community seldom invited others for coffee in their homes any more. The women attributed this change to the establishment of coffee shops. Instead of inviting someone over for a coffee as they would have in the past, now people called on the phone and asked them if they wanted to go out with them for a coffee.

Zoé remarked that, "You know, the new trend now it is to go out for a coffee." The coffee shops were becoming a central feature of community life. Mylène said,

“Everyone goes to Tim Hortons instead of inviting people to their home.” The women visited each other less often than they had been accustomed to doing in the past.

According to Mylène, habits and customs have changed over the years. She added, “If you want to see people, you have to go to Tim Hortons. Everyone goes there!” New trends began to arise in rural regions. Mylène commented, “My neighbours, now, will call me to invite me to go to Tim Hortons with them. We don’t have coffee at home anymore.” According to her, people meet less and less on the church steps or at the neighbour’s kitchen table. Now, coffee shops have replaced these meeting places.

Zoé explained how her long-time habits have changed: “I had a habit of going out walking with my neighbour, but less so now. She wants me to go to have a coffee with her at Tim Hortons instead.” These women found that these changes caused people to see less of each other. People did not take the time to visit and chat with their neighbours. This reduced the number of visitors at home for these women.

All the changes occurring in these women’s communities are important elements of their lived experience. For the participants, these changes mean that the face of rural communities is changing rapidly, new lifestyles or habits are emerging, and they must adjust to these changes. Even with all these challenges they are facing or must live with, they still wish to remain in their community.

5.3.3 Defending Their Choice of Living in a Rural Community

The research participants insisted that living in a remote setting did not inconvenience them even though they faced obvious challenges related to limited access to facilities and services. They did not see their life there as problematic because of these challenges to overcome. Rather, they saw their rural location as one of the best places on

earth to live. They vehemently defended their choice to remain where they were due to their attachment to their rural community.

The women used the notion of attachment to explain why they liked where they lived. Marie-Claude described rurality this way: “My little corner of the world, it’s here. It’s here that I belong. I’d give all the gold in the world to stay here. I find that we’re in a beautiful corner of the world.” Most of the women in this study emphasized that their rural setting was the only area they knew because they had always lived there. A few of the women had lived elsewhere, but they finally came back to the place where they were born. The women who had lived elsewhere declared that despite being away for some time, they always remained attached to their place of origin. Janelle, for example, explained that she was attached to her rural community and this was why she had returned there:

Because this is where I was born. The neighbouring house, the big white house next to here, that’s where I was born. I’ve gone elsewhere, that’s true, but we always came back, we always knew that we’d come and settle here.

Participants were happy and satisfied within their community because they felt a sense of belonging and attachment. Joanie remarked, “I feel an attachment to my rural roots”.

Attachment to their rural community was an important aspect of their daily life. They felt they knew every aspect of their community. Janelle said, “Yes, I’m attached to my house, to my community, it’s a strong bond.” The feeling of being connected with their rural setting translated into participants’ desire to stay there as long as possible. Joanie explained it this way: “We’re home here, that helps us to stay here.”

Being attached to their rural community also stirred a range of emotions that the women experienced in their daily life. Participants simultaneously felt moments of confidence and joy, but they also knew that the day might come when they would have

to leave. However, for now, they benefitted from this bond and felt good living in that environment. Véronique described how her environment made her love who she was even more: “Here, I feel good on the inside. You stay where you love it the most.”

The participants’ thoughts about rurality illustrated a strong bond to their communities and the people who live there. Other significant themes also emerged from their reflections on their rural lives. The women stated emphatically that the community in which they live is where they truly belong. They knew their environment very well. Janelle indicated that living in a rural setting was like “being with the family, being with the people we grew up with.” That strong feeling of living in a place of which they knew every aspect conveyed a deep sense of belonging. Everything that surrounded them was familiar. Noémie said, “I’ve always lived here, and I can’t see myself living elsewhere. I was born here.”

The participants proclaimed that they were very content with their environment. Whenever they talked about feeling attached to their surroundings, or experiencing a sense of belonging and comfort, it generated immense pride that they lived in a rural community. The participants also used words such as “love”, “familiar” and “knowing people”, to name a few, to emphasize how important their surroundings were to them. Zoé explained, “I’ve always been raised in this rural community. I’ve always loved the countryside. I’ve always loved working the soil.” They stressed how happy they are to live in such an environment. Without hesitation, they elaborated on how they experienced living in a rural area. Ariane said, “That’s what’s most pleasant about the countryside, everyone knows each other. It’s a nice life. I wish you one just like this.” Ariane had moved away when she was seventeen, but when she retired, the only place she wanted to be was in the rural community where she was born.

Clearly, rural communities constitute the quintessence of their identity. The women are aware of the negative connotations associated with living in rural areas, so they actively challenge these negative images about their rurality. Some participants even encouraged other individuals to move to a rural setting. This strong sense of belonging prompted them to encourage others to have such a good life. In fact, Mylène often invited people to move to a rural area. She said, “I’d tell people to come to live in the country. You’re free [there] and you can put your trust in people.” These women’s perspectives contrasted with the social construction of rural communities, which portrays them in a negative light, and which discourages individuals from moving to such places.

Living in a rural community created a sense of being home. When the women talked about their rural setting, they used words such as *home*, *being at home* or *feeling at home*. Janie explained what it meant to live in a rural setting this way: “For me, it’s like I told you, I really love it here, I’m home.” Also, Ariane mentioned, “Rural settings are so beautiful, it’s so beautiful at home. At home, we do what we want.” For participants such as Ariane and Joanie, the word *home* meant more than a roof over their head. Home, in a sense, was more than just a house, it represented a beloved environment they did not want to lose. Marie-Line explained, “If I left here, I’d miss it. I’d miss my home.” Moreover, when they talked about their rural community, they used the word *home* to define it as well. For instance, Marie-Line insisted that if she had to leave the place where she lived to move closer to the village, she would miss being home. Home for her was the place where she lived right in her rural community.

Furthermore, the participants used the word *home* to describe the environment that went beyond their backyard. Some of them described their lived experiences by gesturing out of the window to explain that what surrounded them outside was beautiful and vast. They had the impression that all this landscape belonged to them. When the women looked at the land, it appeared so vast to them. They saw the sea and the land far away on the horizon. They expressed ownership not only of their own piece of land but of the entire landscape surrounding them. Ariane said, “Life in the countryside, it’s not like life in the city, it’s very big and so vast that when you look outside, you feel like you are outside. It feels like everything belongs to you.”

While the women did not hesitate to describe their rural community as paradise, public opinion of these regions is often negative. For example, the people in rural regions are often portrayed as “those poor people who live there”. Annabelle explained her feelings about this portrayal this way: “They [people] come to those small communities and they see us as ‘less than’. Just because we’re in a small community doesn’t mean we’re more stupid than others” (Annabelle). The participants insisted that all those negative portrayals of people and rurality did not stop them from having a good quality of life.

5.3.4 Being Surrounded by Their Culture and Their Language

Another aspect the women brought up was the fact that they were immersed in Acadian culture and the French language. Even as they spoke about their rural community, their identity as Francophones Acadians shone through. Both facets were intertwined: their identity and their Acadian community contributed to who they were as older women, which, for them, made their community so special.

These women lived in an environment where culture and language were experienced in terms of population: most of the people in these rural settings were French speakers and cultural Acadians. Since their environment was mainly French speaking and Acadian, their daily life included all the things that meant being an Acadian woman, such as worshipping in French at church, going to the store and being served in French as well as being treated in French at the closest health care facilities. For these women, both culture and language were an inherent part of their identity. Josée said:

It's very important, our French language and culture. We must preserve it. Also, if you can't cultivate your language and your culture, you risk losing them. It's important to preserve who you are and to preserve your identity. Here, it's all French, it's the majority.

Some women did not consider themselves to be bilingual, but because they knew enough English words to hold a conversation and be served in English, they deemed it acceptable to shop in English-speaking establishments. They did not feel inadequate when communicating in English. Furthermore, the idea of having to speak English did not bother some of the participants because they did not have to navigate daily in an English environment as in other communities. Janie elaborated on what this meant to her:

For me, the language, it doesn't bother me. In terms of the language, if I go shopping in Moncton, sometimes we go to Bangor, Maine, but I can speak English enough to get by, so it doesn't bother me. Everything around me is French, my children and those that I spent a lot of time with when I was young, they were all Acadians.

The participants were often surrounded by the majority English culture; however, this was not a problem for them as their community of origin is French and Acadian. They did not live in an English environment, and they all had Acadian roots to hold

onto. Mylène explained, “The culture is French, it’s a French parish, so everything’s in French. It’s very Acadian.” Even today, they still wanted to transmit their language, culture, traditions and history to their loved ones. For these women, there was no doubt that the French language was important in their daily life. This was yet another reason they wished to remain in their community as long as possible: it allowed them to be immersed in their Acadian culture and French language in everyday life.

The participants had Acadian ancestors who settled most of the parishes where they lived, and for some of them, in honour of the hard work accomplished by their ancestors, it was essential to pass their culture and their language on to their children and grandchildren. Ariane explained, “It’s very important! I tell myself that with all the hardships our ancestors went through, they deserve to be respected because of the deportation at Grand-Pré.” The Acadian culture they love and the French language they speak were central to their identity from the time they were born. Janelle said, “The French language, it’s important because our culture is important as well. When you’re Acadian, you always stay an Acadian.”

Although culture and language were not the first aspects that were raised when the women talked about rurality, they still meant very much to them. Véronique stated, “To live in French, that’s preserving your culture. One of the greatest gifts that I can keep is preserving my culture and reading in French.” All participants emphasized the importance of being proud of their Acadian culture and speaking their mother tongue. Véronique insisted on this aspect:

It’s important for me to stay in an Acadian community, it’s my culture. I’m more at ease speaking in my language. I could manage in English, but I prefer staying in a community that represents my culture and my language.

Living in their parish meant that the participants were part of the majority, culturally and linguistically. They lived everyday life solely in French. However, recent changes occurring in these rural Francophone settings had created challenges for these women. Noémie explained:

Before, it was all French people. Now, it's almost all English people. There are Germans, and they speak English, so we don't know each other. I don't speak much English, so I don't know my neighbours well, they're English. They're very nice. Before, it was French people who lived here and we all knew each other, but now, it's English people, and we don't know each other anymore.

The changes occurring within these communities made it more difficult for some participants to get to know their neighbours because they did not speak English or were not comfortable speaking English with them. Being unable to communicate in the other language creates a barrier, as Zoé explained:

I understand English, but when it comes to talking, I don't have much practice. It's more difficult. I know the words, it is just that they don't come out fast enough, because we were raised in an Acadian culture, in French.

These barriers created a distance between neighbours and produced difficulties as basic as not being able to ask for help or assistance when needed. The language barrier was a challenge they had to overcome. It was hard for them to approach a person who could not speak their language. In fact, there are Acadian, Francophone women who do not feel they are bilingual; they struggle to speak English and even feel ashamed of their accent. Frequently, they prefer not to have contact with their new neighbours to avoid awkward situations as a result of not communicating fluently. Many keep on doing their daily activities with few contacts with their neighbours. This is a major change for many rural communities. The women in the study who faced these new challenges within their community shared how they experienced such a transformation, but they could not see themselves moving into a city.

5.3.5 Refusing to Move Because Cities are Less Attractive

The women raised another important aspect of living in a rural setting: a good quality of life. One participant described living in rural New Brunswick as a lifestyle choice. Living in the countryside was a choice and not the result of a lack of alternatives. Natasha clearly explained this choice as follows: “And if you live in the countryside, it’s because you want to, you’re not obligated to live there. Older people today aren’t obligated to do that.” The women truly had a choice, and they opted to remain in a rural setting. They were aware that other options exist, but they chose to live there because they liked it. Another aspect of this quality of life was that they could choose what to spend their time and energy on. Natasha explained that it was easier to say no in a rural environment than in an urban setting: “In the countryside, you can say no more easily because you have excuses. Really, I believe that you do what you want more in the countryside. You have less pressure, less pressure.” For her, saying no did not incur a feeling of guilt, but a sense of comfort, because she could refuse to do something when she did not want to do it.

The women believed that in larger urban areas, there was a greater obligation to follow others and to conform. As Natasha explained, people are followers by nature: “What is different in an apartment? In an apartment, you’re surrounded by people. You believe that you must visit them, that you must host them. Here, well, there is tranquility, it’s beautiful.” According to the women, in rural settings, people can say no to other people’s requests because they have more excuses, such as having no means of transportation, being too far away from the activities, or simply because they do not want to. Natasha also thought that the reason why it was harder to say no in urban settings was because in cities there is an obligation to host. Participants’ views about

people who live in urban settings were formed according to their lived experiences in rural communities. For them, it was easy to compare the two settings based on their own experience and their daily life. They were convinced that it is easy to get help or to say no to others in the country, because there are fewer people living in rural areas than in cities.

The women explained that in the city there are always activities happening daily and that organized events are much larger than in rural areas. Marie-Claude noted, “For example, in the city, when they do things, it’s always big, very big. In the countryside, the activities aren’t organized like they are in the city.” For the women, organizing events appeared to be simpler in a rural setting. The participants indicated that when they take part in local organized activities, they feel more comfortable among the people. Moreover, they believed it was easier to decline to take part in such activities when they did not feel like participating. Natasha provided the following example:

We’re followers, we love following others. In the countryside, we don’t have anyone to follow, but in the city, well yes, of course, we must do charity work because the other one is doing it. Well, don’t you find that we’re followers? Well, now, the bingo at night, everyone’s going to the bingo, I must go too. Here in the countryside, if you want to go, you go, if you don’t want to, you don’t go.

Likewise, in rural settings, the pressure to volunteer barely existed because individuals were more prone to saying no if they wanted to. Ariane said, “At home, we do what we want.” This notion of being able to say no seemed easier in rural settings to the participants. Distance did not appear to be a limitation but rather, it provided a good excuse to decline. This ability made them feel assertive: they enjoyed the freedom to accept or refuse in a situation.

Some participants compared the ability to say no in rural and urban settings. In the city, they believed that there were many opportunities to volunteer and there was always

something to do. The sheer number of activities and the need for volunteers created a sense of obligation to volunteer that did not occur as often in rural settings. Natasha said, “In the city, there’s always something, volunteer work at the nursing home, volunteer work for the church. Do this, do that. You feel obligated to do that. In the country, it’s peaceful.” The women perceived that it was easier to reject volunteer work in rural settings. The women believed that there are many more people in the city who make demands on one’s time, and it is difficult to say no to them. For example, Natasha, felt that living in a rural setting provided the freedom to say no. It was important to her to feel free and at peace in her environment and this freedom led to a better level of satisfaction with her life.

Natasha’s desire for freedom and peace was echoed by other participants. Marie-Line said, “I’d miss being free. I’d never change my life to leave for the city.” Other participants explained that the reason why they loved living in a rural community was that they could do whatever they wanted to do. This feeling was stirred in part by the vast space that surrounded them. They felt a sense of liberty because of the expanse of the countryside. Rurality provided space and privacy, with large fields as far as the eye could see, giving them the impression of being free.

Ultimately, they enjoyed living in their rural community not only because they knew the people or because they live close to their children, but because of the sense of being a member of that same community. Annabelle mentioned, “I wouldn’t change, even if I were 35 years old, I would not leave this place. I’d find work here, but I’d find something to keep me here, because we have peace.” The participants’ feeling of freedom stemmed from a sense of being in control of their environment which allowed

them to do what they wanted without having to ask for permission from others. Natasha said:

I love the countryside. I don't mean to say that it's not nice in the city, but you're jammed, one house on the other. Also, in cities, people watch what others are doing. For example, in the city, if she's at home, people wonder what she's making for her supper, if she goes outside, people ask themselves where is she going? Or rather, they say, "She's going out again tonight! She came back home at such and such an hour." In the city, people talk about others. But, you know, I don't have that problem. In the countryside, we don't even think about that. Oh no, not in the countryside, in the country, it's the quiet life.

Deciding to live in a rural setting meant being in control without worrying that somebody would check up on them or pry into their business. As Valerie aptly stated, "You're free, you can go outside! You can go outside naked if you want, no one will see you." For the participants, the notion of freedom included being able to do what they wanted because the neighbours were not always checking what they are doing. Most felt that in the city, people watched what others are doing. All this surveillance would not allow individuals to have the freedom to do what they wanted.

This is surprising because in the dominant social discourse, it is precisely in rural settings that people are perceived as watching what others are doing or knowing everything about others. The women in the study believed the contrary to be true: it is in cities that people watch each other due to their proximity to one another. In cities the houses are close together, which gives the impression that others can easily see inside the house or the yard. They can even hear what others are talking about when they are outside the house. The women did not believe that in their own environment individuals were being scrutinized by their neighbours or that others were critical of what they were doing in their daily life. Mylène explained:

But it's better if you can stay in your house instead of going into a nursing home, into apartments. In the apartments, everyone's always watching, you're less free.

It's less private. In the countryside, in your house, if you want to go out, you go. You're free to do what you want to do. You can take walks wherever you want to go. For example, you can go blueberry-picking. You don't always have someone inspecting everything you do. The houses are further apart and more private. In the country, you are free.

In every interview, when the participants spoke of rurality, the notion of freedom emerged frequently. The participants felt that the freedom of living in a rural area is a source of joy and satisfaction. They asserted that if they had to leave their home one day, they would deeply miss the freedom they had thanks to their small community. Zoé said, "Here, we're free. There are wide-open spaces." All the participants brought up this feeling of freedom and peace. These feelings shared by participants were different from the common image of individuals living in a rural setting. Their experiences contradict popular perceptions.

It is interesting to note how individuals living in the countryside hold the same stereotypes about the city as city dwellers have about those living in the countryside. Natasha concluded by saying, "In the country, I'm free, I do what I want." The quality of life participants experienced in rural communities made it easy to live there. The women in this study spoke about how rural settings were more welcoming and how it was more pleasant to live there than in larger centres. Their perceptions about urban settings were more negative because they felt people there were lonelier and more individualistic, having to look out for themselves. These women did not think community members in cities were as supportive of each other as in rural communities.

Another dimension the women brought up was the challenge of making new friends in urban centres. Janelle said, "In a city, we wouldn't make friends quickly. We wouldn't have that in a city. In a new city, we wouldn't be quickly making new friends."

Clearly, one common characteristic of rurality for these women was the familiarity that existed among community members. They compared rural areas to urban settings to illustrate their point. According to them, in the city, people would not help them like people do in the country. Valerie noted, “In the countryside, you’re better treated as an older person because everyone knows you. You’re better treated, and you’re better served in the countryside.” Being in a place where community members recognized them was important. Zoé noted, “I find that we all know each other. We’re all like friends. We go to the store and we know each other.” On the contrary, the city was synonymous with anonymity, something they did not value. Joanie said, “It’s different from the city. In the city, you don’t know your neighbours.” Valerie added that this familiarity facilitates contacts in public settings:

Yes, yes, if you go out, you go somewhere, you see someone you know, they come to talk to you right away. It’s quite friendly. Yes, you go to the hospital, you go to church, they all come talk to you, yes, they call me by my name.

Above all, being surrounded by familiar people in rural areas made this environment a treasured place where participants wanted to stay as long as possible. The people around them were collaborators: they added to what is important to them. One of the main reasons the women stayed in a rural area was the welcoming nature of the people in their community. They wanted to convey the importance of the warmth of the people they know and did not want to lose this human touch.

All the women were convinced that if they were to live in a city, they would feel bored because everything looked the same. When they compared life in rural and urban settings, they spoke in spatial terms. They mentioned place in terms of physical space and described its limitations. For them, moving to the city meant living in an apartment. One participant explained, “The apartments in the city, they’re stylish, they’re nice,

they're new, but they're not home. All the same, it must be troublesome" (Marie-Line). For them, then, living in an urban setting meant living within a smaller environment than they were used to. Their outside space would also be smaller because everything would be so close together. Cloé noted, "Because in the city, you're tossed together. The houses are crammed together. I'd suffocate there. On the one hand, the houses are too close together and there are many cars." The image they had of the city did not encourage these women to want to move there. Joanie noted, "Here, we breathe in good air and we're not crammed together like in the city." When asked to explain what made them stay in a rural area far away from services, participants described their environment as a place that brought serenity and a sense of satisfaction. They mainly talked about the positive aspects of their situation. Véronique said:

I couldn't see myself living in the city. You look outside the window, and all you see are other people's yards. You go into the city, and everything looks the same. The same houses and the same yard. Everything looks the same.

The women all mentioned that they liked to stay in a rural area because of the beauty of the space that surrounded them. For them, rurality encouraged a lifestyle of simplicity. It was easy and pleasant to feel welcome into someone's house at any time.

The women described their rural community as a place where they found a good quality of life due, in part, to the simplicity of life, the familiarity between people, and the sense of owning the space. This sense of familiarity was particularly important because they lived in an environment where they were surrounded by their culture and their language. Even though their community was experiencing a decline in population, the participants appreciated their daily life as Acadians living in a rural Francophone community. Again, their determined tone during the interviews demonstrated a sense of urgency to defend their decision to remain in the rural community as older women.

5.4 Living at the Intersection of Gender, Age and Rurality

The participants sensed that society looked down on them because they were still living in their homes despite their advanced age, and even more so because they chose to stay in rural areas. They spoke at length about these elements during the interviews. They made it clear that these perceptions stem from their age and their choice to live (for the most part) alone in a rural community.

5.4.1 Being Treated with Ageism and Sexism as Older Women Unable to Live Independently in a Rural Community

Even though the women explained how good they felt about living in their home, they still experienced pressure to leave because they were staying in a place that, in the eyes of many, was not suitable. The women in this study often felt judged by others because they decided to remain in their home. Since the women were older, family and community members believed that they were too old to remain in a house that needed repairs. In general people would not be so insistent that a younger person should leave their house in a similar situation.

Marie-Line said, “I’m happy with my house, it’s not new, but it’s mine.” She made that statement because people would repeatedly ask her when she was thinking of leaving her small house.

Joanie complained that people often dictated what she should do to live a better life. According to Joanie, her house was quite old and difficult to maintain, and many people saw this situation as an indication that she also did not take care of herself. If her house looks neglected in the eyes of others, she must be an old woman who also neglects herself. She offered the following example to illustrate how the condition of a house was seen to reflect on its owner:

The school was just in front of my house, so people didn't notice it. So, no one spoke to me about the state of my house and they didn't pity me. The school was demolished, and then people started seeing my house, and from that moment on, they started pitying me in my old house. A lot of them were asking me when I was moving out of my old house. (Joanie)

This example illustrates how society can easily label people based on what they possess. The state of older women's homes influences the way many people evaluate their daily life. The women interviewed were often conscious of how they were perceived by those around them. They felt a constant pressure from others to leave their home. They were aware that people judged their ability to live independently according to the state of their home. Valerie expressed how she felt about this: "I love my life like it is. It's quiet and there are some who could think that I live a sad life, but I'm good. I love my life like it is. It's quiet. I love my house." The people surrounding these women tended to judge them for wanting to remain in their home for the time being. The women felt the weight of the comments about their house and the belief that they should not be living by themselves.

The people who make such comments within the community and put pressure on older women to leave their home often include family members such as brothers or sisters. Other times, comments come from people that older women meet at church or the grocery store. These individuals in the community ask the same question, over and over: "Do you still live in that old house?" By being asked this question, older women constantly feel pressured to consider leaving their house. They believe that others treat them as individuals who are not able to live by themselves. Even in a context where they gain comfort from the familiarity of their environment, their daily life is challenged by the pressure from the community.

Despite being satisfied with what they possess, the women in this study mentioned how others talked negatively about them because they lived alone in their house. These comments typically implied that they were lonely women to be pitied. The women were eager to talk about this topic. They knew that when people made the effort to understand their daily life, it always began with the state of their house. In a sense, they were combating negative discourses directed towards them. These women said they were satisfied with their life. Despite the negative perceptions of their house, they spoke about how happy they felt about living in their environment. Therefore, the notion of home is a central part of who they are. Josée said, “We appreciate our daily life more because we own our house.”

Many of the women, for example Marie-Line, articulated very well that they felt others did not listen to them because they were older women and living alone. Many people in their community openly used words such as “pity” when talking about the daily life of these women living by themselves. They fought back by responding that they were happy, and they needed to make sure that they were heard on the matter once and for all: “People often ask me if I’m still in my old house. Yes, and I’m planning on staying, OK” (Marie-Line).

The participants live daily with the weight of being older women in a society that defines them in terms of their age and whom they live with. The standards used to judge whether or not an older woman is fit to live alone are often determined by an outsider’s perception of what she possesses. Joanie experienced this in the form of unsolicited comments. This is how she aptly described it:

People won’t stop asking me when I am getting out of here. It’s annoying that people tell me that I should sell and go into an apartment when, at my age, I don’t

find it difficult in my old house. As it is, I must be unhappy and not well in my house [according to them].

These women were aware that the perceptions of their house and their material possessions influenced how they were viewed. Often, they heard comments from the people around them that they must be depressed or lonely. People often found that they looked pitiful because they had to endure living alone. The women felt as if they had to continue justifying themselves to stay where they lived. Annabelle's comment was: "They say that I am pitiable because I live alone, because I'm old." On the contrary, being alone, to them, signified being happy and satisfied with their life. Valerie said, "Yes, I'm doing good". Most of the women saw their lives similarly; they were satisfied not only with what they had, but also with where they lived and the fact that they lived alone.

It is evident that these women did not escape the social discourse that pertained to them. When they spoke about their daily life, it was not surprising that they mentioned how others described them and their life. Words such as "pity", "lonely" and even "depressed" left them feeling that they were not being listened to when they expressed their need or their desire to stay in their home.

It was interesting to note how people described and often dictated to participants what they should do to live a better life. As the women demonstrated with the comments they received from others, their ability to make decisions for themselves was constantly undermined. The people in their life believed they were the experts of the lives of the women interviewed. On the contrary, as I will explain in the next section, it was easier for them to stay by themselves precisely because they were women.

5.4.2 Defending Their Choice of Living in Rural Communities

Despite all the negative comments about their decision to stay in their rural area, the participants have nevertheless persisted and made it clear that this is where they want to be for the moment and that they feel good there. They expounded at length on how they are able to do this because they are women who have a long history of caring for others. They can take care of themselves now. They are strong advocates for the right to live as older women in a rural community. They have the assets to do so because of their gender and their lifelong experience in their community, and they continue to defend their choice to remain in rural communities despite all the negative images and descriptions of rurality. Moreover, they firmly stated that they have all the abilities to stay in rural communities specifically because of their gender.

5.4.3 Being Stronger Because of Their Gender

This section is about the impact of gender roles on the participants' lives. During their interviews, the women shared their opinions about being women who are aging, but they also talked retrospectively about their lives as women and how different events in their lives prepared them for what they are experiencing now. The following pages illustrate the influence of gender roles in their daily life as wives and mothers. These roles gave them moral strength and the ability to take care of themselves and be independent.

While taking care of their family and household, the participants experienced the gendered division of labour. They were recognized as the ones who were responsible for the family. The participants explained that because they were women, it was easier to live alone than it would be for men. However, they did not hide more negative aspects or

difficulties associated with being alone, such as financial problems and feelings of marginalization because they chose to remain in their home by themselves.

Most participants underlined that their gender had contributed to the development of abilities to stay by themselves after the death of their husbands, and they believed that they were stronger due to their gender. Moreover, the domestic work contributed to their ability to remain by themselves even today. Josée explained that because women have more fortitude than men, they can more easily live alone in their home: “I believe it’s easier for an older woman to live alone than a man. A woman has more willpower. A woman has more moral strength than a man, in my opinion”. Some women added that their strength came from the abilities they had developed during the course of their entire life.

According to Marie-Claude, gender and the domestic work have given them what they believe to be moral strength to endure life’s challenges. The participants explained that women possess a strength that men have not acquired during their daily life. These women were the first responders for the whole family, no matter what the problem was. Due to the role they had played all their life, when they encountered a difficulty they could easily solve it, because they solved many other problems during their life as a wives and mothers.

When the participants talked about their lived experiences, they often referred to gender. This theme emerged through comparisons of the differences between older men and women who live alone. It was interesting to note that some were convinced that their husbands, had they not passed away before them, would not have survived for quite so long without them.

I didn't want to go before my husband. I wouldn't have liked that because he would've suffered. Men, what they do, they chat in the shopping malls. They chat a lot, but after, when they go home, they're alone. I know some outside my family, they find it difficult. A woman can better get used to things in the house. I know that here, if I had gone before him, he would've gone not long after me, I'm certain. Most men, they wouldn't have been able to live alone at home. (Marie-Claude)

The women contended that there is a significant difference in adaptability between a woman and a man, and they did not hesitate to point out that most of the men their age could not live by themselves. This was interesting to hear, because in the public sphere, it is common to hear women described as frail individuals who should not live alone.

These women also explained that men could not take care of themselves because most of the things they knew about involved working outside the house. Véronique said, "Women have almost always spent their time at home to take care of the house, so it's much easier for a woman. She's always busied herself with meals and cooking." When speaking about the difficulties for men to stay at home by themselves, the participants used expressions such as "Oh, my God, no!", "Impossible!", and "No way!" Some even mentioned that their husbands had said that they could not imagine living alone in the house without their wives by their side. For example, Josée explained that her husband specifically told her this. She said, "My husband would always tell me that he wouldn't like if I went before him. [He would say:] 'If you go before me, I'd never be able to stay by myself here at home.'" Most of the women attributed this ability to remain alone to the domestic work they performed at home. It was their primary role within the marriage.

When the time came for them to live by themselves because their husband had passed away, the participants did not see this as difficult, since they remained in the

same environment they were used to, with familiar tasks such as making meals, cooking for the grandchildren, repairing clothes and doing daily chores in the house.

The gender experience of the women also contributed to their independence. As Natasha clearly stated: “A woman can better manage by herself.” Participants saw independence as a quality that women possess more readily compared to men. That was the reason why it was easier for them to be alone compared to men. In contrast, the participants attributed the quality of independence to themselves as women, and not to men of their age group. Natasha explained it as such:

Men, it is impossible for them to live alone, men depend very much on women. If a man is alone, he must go where there are women. He must go to an apartment, and he must have his little meals sent from the nursing home, and he must organize himself in some other way. A man, he’s used to the outside, unless he’s a good cook, and you know he must be two-in-one, there. It must be much, much more difficult for a man.

This same participant also explained independence in terms of keeping the same life as before the death of her husband. Even though they lived alone, these women still did the same things. Natasha indicated her surprise that some people did not realize men could not live alone, even asking me, “Don’t you think it is true? Men cannot live by themselves.” She added, “Maybe there are some, but you can count them, they are not many”. The participants thought that men tended to find it harder to adapt to a new environment than women. One participant believed that, because older women had known domestic work all their life, they were able to adapt more easily than men to life in a nursing home. According to Véronique, women had much less difficulty adapting to change than men of the same age. This observation based, on her work in a nursing home throughout her career, confirmed her belief:

Women have always been at home taking care of the house, so it’s much easier for a woman to adapt to living alone. She’s always busied herself with the meals and

the cooking. I noticed that even in my work at the nursing home. Women would adapt themselves much better than the men in the nursing home. Many men never ever adapted to their life at the nursing home, I think, because men are more destabilized once they get in the home. In my opinion, men adapt less to that lifestyle, which is to say, living in a nursing home.

It was also easier for women to adapt to being alone because, according to Janelle, the people who lived near them felt a kind of obligation to help. She said, “It’s easier for a woman because people say to themselves, ‘It’s a woman all alone, I have to go help her’”. She further explained that men’s work was quite different from women’s work, especially in the era when she grew up. That era was one of well-defined roles for women and men. Zoé said, “And after that, I got married, then we didn’t work anymore. We had to take care of the children in those times.”

For most of the participants, it was evident that their role within the family was centred on the household. Some participants felt it was their decision to be a homemaker. Josée explained, “I’ve never been to work outside of the house. I preferred raising my children, and I’ve never regretted my choice to be at home.” Several of them adamantly insisted that domestic chores were their responsibility: “It was me who drove the children, because our dentist was in Miramichi. It was my job” (Zoé). Their gender determined the work they did and their role within the family.

The gender role, which was described as involving domestic labour, also came with the responsibility of taking care of others. Ariane said, “For me, the children, it’s my first job. A mother or a grandmother, especially a grandmother. That’s all that we’re good for! To nurture others.” During the interviews, when talking about domestic labour, the women linked it to the role of taking care of others. They also took the time to note that people around them always assumed that they were going to take care of others. For example, Noémie disclosed:

I had to take care of my parents. So, I've always stayed here with them. Of course, if my parents could've taken care of themselves, we wouldn't have stayed here. We would've gone and bought a house and lived elsewhere. My brother, he left to work and there was no one else to stay with my parents. It was hard to leave them all alone here, and they were sick. I stayed here and raised my children.

The women were socialized at an early age to take care of others. Two of the participants mentioned that they quit school early to take care of their mothers or to help in the house. Josée said that she had to quit school to “be the maid of the house.” She added, “I had to leave school to help on my father’s farm”. For women such as Josée, domestic labour and taking care of others went hand in hand. It was their job. Marie-Claude said, “For us, it’s our role in the house. Of course, there are many women now who work outside [the home].” This participant mentioned that today, women work outside the house, but she made sure to emphasize that the work still “starts at home” (Marie-Claude). Joanie conveyed her thoughts about the notion of domestic labour and taking care of others. Her words were rich in significance as to why gender plays a major role in defining the place occupied by women in the world:

Before that, in my generation, women were much more subservient. I'll never forget at the Women's Institute it was comprised entirely of women, but in the books, there were no women's names, we'd all signed “Mrs.” but with our husband's name. I think that's what took away our self-confidence as women.
(Joanie)

What emerged during the interviews was that gender norms impose a set of values that strongly shape the image of what a woman is, where she is supposed to spend her time, and what she is supposed to do as a woman. For Cloé, it was understood that when her mom became sick, she would be the one who would take care of her. As she explained, “When I was in fifth grade, I graduated to sixth grade, and Mom got ill. They took me out of school. I had to be the helper, like a servant or a maid”.

Nevertheless, the participants clearly conveyed the message that the stereotypes about women and definitions of their work had a positive impact on their life now. They had learned how to take care of a house and other people, so they did not feel incapable when they found themselves alone without a husband. They explained that because they had learned such skills, they still felt able to cope now that they were living alone. They even felt strong and capable of taking care of themselves; they knew exactly what they were doing. They did not feel as if they lacked the knowledge and the ability to live autonomously. They felt in control of their life using the skills they had developed from an early age. The work that had been imposed on them provided the skills they needed to cope with daily life when they found themselves living alone in old age. They explained that all the assets they possessed today also gave them strength.

Furthermore, according to Janelle, women were more sociable, and this was helpful when living alone: “I’d even say that it’s more difficult for a man because most men are less sociable. A woman will go towards others more than men, and she’ll involve herself in activities more.” The participants explained that the volunteer work they did in their rural community helped them to be confident about staying in that same community. Their involvement gave them the opportunity to know more people than their husbands. They knew each other and they want to remain in the rural community. However, Janelle believed that men were not as involved as women. According to her, “A lot of men who live alone must be bored.” What Janelle meant was that men do not socialize a lot, so they remain alone with fewer community resources to support them compared to women.

This female adaptability was also accompanied by courage. The term “courage” was frequently mentioned to describe how it felt to live alone. According to Ariane:

Well, for me, they're [men are] not made for living alone. You know, if I had passed away before my husband, he wouldn't have been able to accept that. He passed away when the children were young. Maybe he would've had the children sent away, I don't know. A woman has more courage than a man, a woman can manage better than a man if she lives all alone.

Ariane was also convinced that because men do not socialize a lot, they are less likely to seek support compared to women.

The daily life of the women in this study is summed up, for the most part, as one of satisfaction with their current situation. Their experience with domestic work and taking care of others has given them the willpower needed to remain alone and in control of their daily lives. They showed pride in not feeling deprived even though they are now alone. They were proud of this accomplishment. This is a new way of seeing domestic labour and its influence on the life of older women today.

5.5 Summary of the Chapter

The results addressed the sense of being at home for the women in the study and the meaning of owning their home. This is not necessarily tied to living in the same house where they raised their family, but it is linked to being able to tell people that they still live by themselves.

For these women, developing a feeling of being in control meant seeing themselves in an environment which belongs to them. By being able to explain to those around them that they were still living in their home, they could assert loudly that they are masters of their home—and their lives. Indeed, being at home provided them with a sense of control over their daily lives because they chose to stay in their home. This choice was, above all, an informed choice made with the awareness that one day they would surely have to leave this place. However, for the moment, they remained there because they had decided to.

The participants had much to say about living alone as an older woman. Several aspects were raised during the interviews in relation to their daily life in a rural community. The notions of attachment and rurality as home were predominant in their accounts. The importance of living in an Acadian environment and the interdependence with others in their community were also discussed. Almost all the participants talked about the major changes they witnessed in their community.

Despite negative images that are often projected onto them, the women explained that it was in fact because they are women with significant life experience that they could live alone and provide support as well as accept support from the community. This support helped them to face challenges in their daily life, such as no longer being able to drive to do errands as they had been used to doing. These women also stressed that they, too, gave support to others by sharing their meals or taking care of other people's home in their absence. This kind of support gave these women a sense of belonging to the community and helped them to overcome obstacles in their daily life.

The participants strongly believed that society's negative depictions about its aging population and its rural settings have an impact on how they are treated by the public, which then translates into social policies. The province of New Brunswick is primarily rural. Issues such as poverty, a lack of jobs and services as well as the exodus of the young are often used to describe rural communities. This discourse portrays a negative image about these regions and the people who still live there.

The women demonstrated the different attitudes of the people around them, whether family or members of their community, towards their being alone, with concrete examples. They experienced sexism and ageism through words, comments and questions that portrayed them as frail and isolated. However, they felt stronger than men of the

same age and attribute this to their gender. It is for these reasons that they stood by their decision to live independently in a rural community. The next chapter will examine the results of this study in relation to the literature on the target population. The main topics are living alone in one's home and living in rural communities. I will then discuss the implications of the results for practice and provide suggestions for future studies in the field of older women in rural communities.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This study helped to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of Acadian, Francophone women aged 75 years and older who live in rural communities.

In this chapter, I will discuss the contradictions in what the women shared during interviews about their lived experience. They clearly expressed how happy they were to live in such rural settings and wanted to remain there as long as they could. However, they found it difficult that most of the services were closing one after another, some of them feeling that the government neglected older people and the rural communities where they lived. Also, a discussion on the intersections of age and gender will expose certain experiences related to age and gender that interfere with the life of older women who live in their rural community. While participants enjoyed living in their rural communities by themselves, they were confronted with comments from others because of their status as older women who lived independently.

The participants portrayed their home as a haven and they were happy with their choice to remain there. However, they were also realistic and aware of their needs, present and future, with regard to staying where they were. They explained the challenges that people living in rural areas face. For example, some participants disagreed emphatically with how an older woman is perceived because she lives independently.

Most of the women focused on explaining that they were doing well despite the challenges and limitations that arose from living independently. They stressed that they lived in a rural community by choice, and remained there because they were able to make their own choices. They did not hide their difficulties or the fact that they

sometimes found their life burdensome. Many researchers have identified the experiences of women but have also deconstructed the negative perceptions about older women living independently.

The participants were thankful for being women because gender roles contributed to their ability to take care of themselves. However, they also said that they were very grateful when others, either family members or neighbours, gave them a hand with different chores. This form of assistance made it easier, and in some cases possible, for them to remain at home in their rural community. They described themselves as independent, and able to live by themselves.

Considering the intersection of age and gender is particularly important as these women live with pressure from others because they are getting older and living alone as a woman. To this intersection, it is necessary to add the place where they live since this place is described as “a community that is emptying itself” of people and services. Even though their rural communities are facing challenges, older women still want to remain in those places. They are both happy and worried about the major changes occurring in their surroundings. All these reflections and thoughts contain contradictions that are significant to the understanding of their experiences. While they strongly affirm their independence, at the same time, they also mention how the support of others around them helps them to stay longer in their rural communities. The contradictions will be explored further on.

The notion of “underground support”, a new concept that emerged during the interviews, will be presented at the end of this chapter. This type of support is invisible and hard to quantify in terms of numbers, but the participants gave many examples of services received from individuals in their surroundings. This invisible support gives

them a sense of being a member of the community even though it is not well recognized.

It also represents an important aspect of their lived experience in rural communities.

These findings are presented in light of the literature on older women.

6.1 When Age and Gender Intersect: Defending Their Choices as Older Women Living Independently in Rural Communities

The women who were interviewed felt a strong attachment to their environment.

However, they noted that there were always people who felt sorry for them for being alone in their home. People in their surroundings, whether the family or members of the community, often told them that they should leave their home and live elsewhere. These comments, marked by ageism and sexism, highlight a refusal to acknowledge the women's desire to live independently, chiefly because these people could not believe that an older woman could be happy living by herself. Butler (1969) stated that ageism was imposed by a society that defined the aging population as people in the final phase of life, a period when they were deemed useless. This description became the dominant view on aging (Browne, 1998; Butler, 1969; Cruikshank, 2003), which warps society's vision of aging, implying that it is an undesirable and difficult life experience.

Furman (1997) explained that ageism was a form of discrimination against older people well anchored in society in general. Many people adopt a discourse where youth represents the new and the future, while old age is synonymous with the end, the useless, and the worn out. As a result, older women tend to define themselves in this light and no longer see themselves as useful or productive. As Furman (1997) urged, it is now time to deconstruct this dominant discourse in society, which contributes to undermining old age.

In this study, it also became clear that societal assumptions about getting older and living independently in one's home are synonymous with being lonely and isolated. Furthermore, if the house appeared to be in poor condition, people assumed that the woman who lived there was also in a poor state and described her as frail and lonely. These negative valuations have an adverse influence on the daily lives of older women. Grenier and Hanley (2007) showed that some older women may decide not to venture outside their home often to avoid being confronted with these negative perceptions. As Sontag (1972) said, getting older is not easy, and it is even more difficult when one is a woman. Women are already underestimated simply because they are women (Browne 1998; Clarke 2011; Grenier & Hanley 2007). Women experience ageism and sexism daily, therefore it is important to deconstruct those interpretations. Older women try to do so, but because of pervasive ageism and sexism, they are often ignored when they express their choices and their needs.

The older women in this study wanted others to see them as being capable of doing things by themselves. They characterize themselves as being independent. When facing sexism and ageism in their daily life, they also refuted those social images of them by stating loudly that they were independent.

Being independent, for the participants, meant that they were still able to do chores by themselves. However, some of them clearly stated that the support they received from their children helped them to remain alone. The independence felt in these examples demonstrated that they were still capable of doing chores even though they were older women. Other people wanted them to be in a place where they received help and support. The women remarked that by being independent they put less pressure on the shoulders of their children. They did not want their children worry about their older mother's being

alone (van den Hoonaard, 2001). Sometimes, women hid the fact that they found it difficult to manage all the responsibilities of taking care of the house (e.g., hard physical work or painting the house) and to ask for services such as getting groceries or driving to different appointments. They develop new types of support within their community because they do not want to inconvenience family members (Glass & Vander Plaats, 2013). When they ask individuals outside their family for support (i.e., informal support), they want to be seen as independent because they have the ability to find help for themselves. By calling someone outside the family, they are showing that they can manage their daily life despite living in a rural community where there are fewer services available. The women in the study felt so strongly attached to the communities where they live that they described these settings as “the best place on earth”, in spite of various barriers encountered in their daily lives.

The women expressed a sense of happiness when they talked about their lived experience, despite the fact that they mentioned how difficult it was to manage different tasks by themselves, either inside or outside the house. They were proud of owning a house but sometimes felt it was a burden on their shoulders. Even though they talked briefly about the difficulties they faced as older women living at home, they also stressed that it was their choice to live there at this time in their life.

Remaining at home is very important to many older people. In fact, they will do whatever is possible to stay in their home, even if they are aware of the challenges they face every day. Remaining in place goes beyond the daily challenges because their home has a positive impact on them and contributes to how they feel about themselves. Aging in place for older people means living in a familiar environment (Dalmer, 2019). This is true for many older women who clearly express their desire to stay in their environment

and defend their choice to remain in place. In particular the choice is linked to the satisfaction they get from living in an environment they know well. This satisfaction has an impact on their self-esteem and their quality of life (Dalmer, 2019). It is not surprising that these older women express their wishes clearly and loudly. They want people to respect that choice.

The participants preferred to emphasize the good days they experienced rather than the difficult ones, pointing out that older women have more moral strength than men. The women explained that they had experienced so many hardships during their life as a wife and a mother, that now, the challenges they faced were perceived as being easy to overcome even though they lived by themselves. However, as soon as they mentioned these challenges to others, they were confronted with ageism and sexism. For instance, the social construction of gender and its intersection with social constructions of aging make it inconceivable for an older woman to be independent. This is the reason why participants often preferred to remain silent about their challenges. As older women, they felt the need to defend their choices daily, and it is not surprising that they chose to focus on the positive aspects of living independently.

Older women feel at home living in a rural region. Aging in place and rurality are linked together. Older women who age in place within rurality define themselves as independent even though they describe some limitations to formal services as well as limitations in their own home. Older women are aware that the costs of providing formal services and developing special care programs are increasing. McDonough and Davitt (2011) demonstrated that it is a financial preoccupation for the stakeholders to develop and provide formal services in the health sector for instance.

Older women are very conscious that some day they will probably need to move in order to have access to formal services, but until then they want to remain in their rural communities. The reason is that, for now, they do not need a lot of formal care. It is not surprising that rural settings do not possess a variety of services; indeed those settings are fragile in terms of population and services (Simard, Dupuis-Blanchard, Villalon & Gould, 2015). Aging in place is an important part of the daily life of older women because they see themselves as in control of their decision to stay where they are. Dalmer (2019) described this as “idealizing the home and surrounding community as privileged sites in which to grow old” (p.41). It is what the women express about their environment and their home.

According to Brassolotto, Haney, Hallstrom and Scott (2019), rural settings remain understudied, particularly in relation to “continuing care”. The government and its public policies tend to neglect the rural regions when new formal services are implemented and, as mentioned before, rural areas are composed of older people. The location is still a challenge when the time comes to deliver formal services in rural areas (Chow, Morgan, Bayly, Kosteniuk, & Elliot, 2019). This is not a surprise for older women who are residents of rural communities. They are all aware of the challenges, but despite those elements, they are not afraid to keep on living in their rural community. The older populations mainly live in rural regions, particularly in New Brunswick, and they are living there with limited access to formal services (Dupuis-Blanchard & Gould, 2018). Those communities have limited possibilities for investment in those services, either due to lack of financial support or human resources (Dupuis-Blanchard & Gould, 2018), even though older people are the ones who, for the most part, are investing in rural regions, for instance by volunteering or as customers. Policy makers and

governments know where their older populations are located, but this does not convince them to invest in services for that portion of the population or in rural settings.

Older women explicitly state that rural regions are neglected in terms of health services. They still believe that it is worth investing in providing services for rural areas because the older people who live in those regions firmly wish to stay in their home. Aging in place and rurality are interconnected. In their research Brassolotto et al. (2019) found that when governments study the health-care system they tend to overlook certain groups in their analyses, including those who live in rural settings. Older women experience in their daily life being neglected by the policy makers because they are older and they are living in rural settings where there are fewer people. It is important not to forget that older women form the majority within the older population. Gender has to be considered when studying aging.

George (2000) indicates that the social construction of gender has defined the place of women in their community and in society in general. This is especially true for older women. They experience traditional roles and negative images based on their gender and their age but still choose to remain where they are. Morganroth Gullette (2007) supported this analysis when she explained that culture is what dictates the place that older people must take in society. This same society continually reminds older women that they should not be left alone. The women in this study were aware of how they were viewed because they chose to stay alone in their home. Too often, they received comments about how they should leave to live elsewhere where they would be better settled and less alone. Similar comments were made about the state of their house (i.e., it is in a poor state, deteriorating, etc.).

Both the participants and their homes were labelled old and frail. It is interesting to note the similarities between the comments made about the condition of the houses and the older women who live in them. Higgs and Gilleard (2014) explained that old age has been defined as a period of time marked with frailty. Society sees older people as being always at risk (Higgs & Gilleard, 2014). This perception of risk makes the people who surround older women become overprotective and infantilizing toward them, for instance by urging them not to live independently. They face constant stigma and pressure to leave their home.

The older women clearly stated that the hardships they experienced throughout their lives enabled them to remain independent. They faced hardships because they were women who felt the social pressure to remain at home instead of joining the workforce. This was one of the forms of sexism women of their generation had to face. While they assumed this gender role for most of their life, at an advanced age, that role became an advantage. They could remain in their homes because the skills they developed as women, wives, and mothers made them resourceful. They had faced many health-related issues when medical treatments were often inadequate or unavailable. They overcame hardships that made them stronger and allowed them to live alone today with the strategies to overcome difficulties (Craciun & Flick, 2016; Kinsel, 2005) that came from working in the domestic sphere.

Some contradictions were observed with regard to taking care of the home. On the one hand, the women talked about how difficult it was to take care of their house. Also, other people reminded them that their home was getting older and in need of repairs, so it was time to leave. On the other hand, they wanted to remain in their home as long as they could. They mentioned how difficult it would be when the time came for them to

leave their home. The participants explained that their home was the place where they collected all the memories of their life. They wanted to hang on to what they possessed despite the challenges of living in a home by themselves. They all stressed the importance of living in this place at the present time. They wanted to assert their desire—and right—to decide for themselves.

Moreover, the women interpreted their reality based on the experiences they had with others. Berger and Luckmann (1966) explained that people define their place within their environment based on the relationships they develop with others. In this study, it was the interpretation people formed about older women that defined their social position. Despite the social pressure that these women faced daily, they resisted.

Grenier and Hanley (2007) explained that older women resisted this social pressure by continuing to remain at home. They lived daily with images that portrayed them as helpless and fragile, but these descriptions did not necessarily represent their reality (Kinsel, 2005). The women in this study saw themselves very differently: they described themselves as much stronger than society's view of them. Petry (2003) observed that older women did not see themselves as lesser beings because they were getting older. As women who had accumulated lifelong experiences taking care of others, they had gained strength and courage. They knew very well how to take care of themselves even though they lived independently now. They did not see themselves as being as fragile as the general discourse portrayed them (Kinsel, 2005).

The women believed that learning to take care of a home at a young age had helped them to remain alone in their home more easily than men of the same age. Their lifelong responsibilities as a woman, a wife, and a mother had made them stronger and able to face adversity (Krekula, 2007). This conviction was upheld in van den

Hoonard's study of older widows. She noted that "... several of the women felt that, had they died first, their husbands would not have been able to cope without them" (2001, p. 95). Similarly, participants saw themselves as experts in their home. They felt they possessed the knowledge and skills to live independently.

Being women who primarily took care of the house and performed domestic work contributed to this feeling of independence and possessing a range of skills to live autonomously. Today, the participants saw themselves as very independent because they still did their own chores and tasks. They wanted others to see them as being able to live where they want. For these women, the notion of independence did not imply living completely without the assistance of others. In the same way that they needed support from other community members sometimes, they, too, wanted to offer support to those who were close to them in the community. Hence, being independent seems to be tied to the notion of interdependence. The participants also placed a lot of emphasis on how proud they felt about their autonomy. As explained by van den Hoonard (2001), older women cannot be totally self-reliant because they "... do not live in isolation..." (p. 138).

The participants in this study experienced major changes across the years in their rural community, such as a lack of services or seeing people they knew move away. These women had to rebuild a new kind of support system, having to count on others if they wanted to stay at home. While the participants talked about being independent, many indicated that they greatly needed others in order to live by themselves. They feared being seen as reliant on community members because this would mean that they needed care, which could lead to others' taking over and making choices for them.

While the participants described their environment as paradise, they also said it was sometimes difficult to take care of their home alone. While they felt a strong attachment to their environment (i.e., community and the place where they lived), they wanted to hide some of the challenges they encountered simply because they did not want others to judge them or to tell them to leave their home. These are the reasons why they talked about what older people need in order to stay in their homes and in their rural communities.

While participants disclosed that they were currently experiencing health issues, these were not identified as a major source of concern for them. They all attributed these issues to their old age. These women wanted so badly to stay where they were that even if they faced health problems, they minimized them in order to stay longer in their rural communities. It was not surprising that the women associated health issues with older populations as most of the popular and political discourses (or social construction of aging) described them as a group who experienced a lot of health problems and who were frail (Higgs & Gilleard, 2014; Kinsel, 2005). Moreover, the reflections they had about health issues were related to past experiences of being in charge and taking care of all the major health issues within their family.

Those past experiences resulted in the women seeing their current health problems as minor compared to health problems faced by their loved ones. Some participants expressed feeling occasionally depressed and lonely, but they also said that they were living a happy life. Older women do not want to highlight their daily difficulties, in part because they are scared that family or community members will put more pressure on them to leave their house. By hiding these challenges from others, they want to protect them from worrying.

All the work done in the domestic sphere by the participants allowed them to feel ready and able to live independently, contrary to what the social discourse tends to depict. They did their work with pride, and they were proud of what they had achieved (Leith, 2006), but their work remained unnoticed (Kinsel, 2005) and underestimated (Furman, 1997). All this, however, did not prevent older women from seeing themselves as strong and in control of their lives today (Petry, 2003). Many women were grateful for their traditional role. For these women, the domestic labour they had performed was linked to their strong belief in their ability to live independently and to confront adversity in their daily life. These older women recognized that domestic work allowed them to fend for themselves.

The home was at the heart of the identity of these older women. This was unsurprising, since society defined them as being primarily responsible for the home and the people who lived there, namely the husband and the children. They have become experts, not only in mothering, but also in the care of their domicile. Authors Luxton (1980) and Terrill and Gullifer (2010) clearly demonstrated how important the home is for women, primary caregivers who ensure that the inhabitants of the home are comfortable. The women of this study imbued their home with the familiar aroma of home-cooked meals. They made decorations that filled the house. They chose the colour of the paint on the walls to complement the décor and made the quilts that warmed their children while they were being rocked. There is no doubt that the identity of this generation of women was shaped by their home—a home where many of them still live today. They had dedicated their lives to this domestic work and considered themselves to be experts in this field. However, they were aware that this work stemmed from the fact that they were socialized as women.

Many authors have established the importance of the home to older women because of gender roles; these older women worked in the home all their life without being truly valued. So, in this sense, it was work that remained invisible, as Siltanen and Doucet (2008) highlighted. In the past, women did not have many alternatives (Shenk, 1998b) other than domestic work (Black & Rubinstein, 2000; Leith, 2006; Stark-Wroblewski, Edelbaum & Bello, 2008). In this study, the women explained that they had to perform domestic work at an early age, sometimes as young as 10 years old, because they were forced to leave school in order to help at home (Petry, 2003). These women became experts in the role of stay-at-home mothers, but that expertise went unrecognized as a form of labour.

The home still defines who these older women are today (Dalmer, 2019). However, now, most people do not see them as fit to live by themselves, and at the same time, they are not seen as productive or useful, since the home is now empty. Older women are considered to have neither the ability nor the knowledge to live on their own. Earlier in life, their identity was linked to their roles as a wife and mother but today, this identity has shifted and is linked more to their dwelling.

The participants were surrounded by memories that helped to construct who they are now as older women. They were understandably attached to their home even if their roles had changed, because the home was where they had performed those roles (Luxton, 1980). Their home was more than a roof to shelter them; it was a place where they had forged an identity (Dalmer, 2019). Their home contained all the memories that they had created over a lifetime. It reflected their identity and their accomplishments as wives and mothers. McRae (1990) and Terrill and Gullifer (2010) emphasized that the identity of older women is indeed influenced by their residence (Dalmer, 2019). When

the identity of individuals is tied to the place where they live, it carries more weight when they live there by choice. For most of the participants, that choice was living in their own home.

The women insisted that where they lived at present was exactly where they wanted to be, despite the pressure from others who tried to dictate to them where to live. As Leith (2006) demonstrated, older women are attached to the one thing they know best: the place where they live. It was not surprising, then, that these women used the mementos they had collected in their home to describe themselves during the interviews.

These women had worked hard to build a life and today, within their home, they recalled their accomplishments. The mementos they had collected reminded them of all the work they had done for others. While people in general tended to disregard how important the home was for these women, it was still surprising that those closest to them did not consider their feelings and their attachment to their home. The advice of others was to live somewhere else where they would be happier and less lonely. The image of the older woman who lived alone was, for most people, one of loneliness, isolation and unhappiness. This was the crux of the social construction of their reality that the women shared during the interviews, what Minichiello, Browne and Kendig (2000) refer to as “society devalu[ing] older people” (257).

The study of reality as a social construction was advanced by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and helped this research to better portray domestic work and the lived experiences of older women. This social construction had an impact on women who adopted imposed roles and consequently internalized them (Black & Rubinstein, 2000; Leith, 2006). Within the social construction of their reality, older women built their identity through their role within the family. Such an image has a significant impact on

how they define who they are in today's world where productivity is so highly valued. As Minichiello, Browne and Kendig (2000) reported, older people see themselves as no longer making active contributions. If they fail to contribute, they are portrayed as useless.

Too often, older women do not see themselves as contributing socially because they no longer perform their traditional roles. These roles forged their identity, because it was only through these roles that they developed and achieved expertise. However, these imposed roles are not valued or acknowledged by society (Browne, 1998). This leads these women to see themselves as less productive than they used to be. This study's participants were all too aware of the social construction of their reality. Even though they could not change how others defined them in a world of productivity, these same women could at least revisit their memories in their home and demonstrate that they had also been very active at one point in their lives. Their memories allowed them to justify how hard they had worked and given of themselves to others.

The home took on new meaning as a point of reference for productivity because they could say that they were still busy there with all their daily activities. These activities—for example the blankets they sewed to give as gifts or the meals they still cooked for grandchildren or neighbours—were not always seen by others as examples of true productivity. These older women remained active, despite how they were being defined by others. Most of the participants felt pressure to justify their decision to remain in their home. Apparently, being an older woman who lives alone invites disparaging comments about her choice to remain in the home.

Regarding their wish to stay in their home for as long as possible, the women in this study often faced negative pressure because of ageism and sexism when it came to making choices about their life and whether to remain in a rural community.

Even though they were capable of living by themselves, the women also believed that it was important to be able to count on others to remain in their community. They recognized that they were connected socially and that they had volunteered a great deal in their life (Kinsel, 2005). All these experiences helped them to develop a variety of support networks within their community (Chapman & Peace, 2008; Kinsel, 2005; Nadasen, 2008).

The participants also understood that rural settings were not always portrayed as ideal or even adequate places to live by society's standards. This was reflected by Keating and Phillips (2008) who explored two definitions of a rural setting: 1) rurality defined in terms of location and size or the number of people who live there; and 2) rurality defined by the people who live in a rural setting themselves. Keating (2008), for example, showed that rurality has an impact on the perception of others regarding how they see the people who live in rural communities.

To better shed light on the lived experiences of older people in rural settings, Keating (2008) stressed the importance of understanding the relationships aged people develop with "nature, human built, social and community settings in which they grow old" (p. 127). For Keating, taking these definitions into account helped to better explain the reasons why a rural setting is a good place for older people to live. Connors, Kennick and Bloch (2013) found that residents of rural communities were proud of living in rurality. On the one hand, the participants were happy to live in rural settings; on the other hand, they were dissatisfied with the government's neglect of rural communities

where they cut or closed services the women relied on. This discontent concerning the lack of services led many older people, who also wanted to live closer to their children and grandchildren, and young families, to move away. According to Keating and Phillips (2008), rurality goes beyond numbers and regions. It also considers that people find rural settings to be good places to grow old. However, regardless of older people's point of view, which deconstructs the negative images that pertain to rural communities and their inhabitants, these negative images have a significant and ongoing impact on politics, policies, and services available to them (Dorfman et al., 2009; Scharf & Bartlam, 2008; Thériault & Rousseau, 2010). The women in this study emphatically expressed that they felt the government neglected rural areas, and, to a certain extent, this negatively influenced the descriptions of these communities.

The participants felt that rurality was synonymous with liberty and living peacefully. They maintained that living in a rural setting meant feeling free and living in a tranquil atmosphere. They were also aware of people's impressions of life in rural communities. People who lived elsewhere described rural areas negatively as places that were all but abandoned, or devoid of community life, and they had not desire to live in such places. Dorfman et al. (2009), Scharf and Bartlam (2008) as well as Thériault and Rousseau (2010) presented these perceptions in their research. These authors analyzed the impact of negative descriptions of rurality and went as far as to say that they directly contributed to marginalizing the people who still lived there. Such descriptions can indeed lead people to ignore discussions on the aging population who reside in these rural settings.

Nevertheless, negative descriptions and perceptions of rurality did not stop the women in this study from considering themselves lucky to live in such a good place. In

this research, the concepts of freedom and peace were highlighted because they represented participants' feelings toward the environment they lived in (Connors, Kennick & Bloch, 2013). When rural communities were initially settled, public opinion was that they were pleasant and enjoyable places to live (Chapman & Peace, 2008). These positive perceptions have influenced the way these Francophone, Acadian women still feel about their community. As mentioned by Keating (2008), people in rural settings are still very attached to their community. In this study, the participants shared these same sentiments toward their communities.

The notion of freedom was important to participants, as it was what made them love living in a rural context. Freedom signified being in control of their daily life and being able to say "no" to others, for example when asked to volunteer. They had the sense that they controlled their daily life because they were not bound by social pressures, and they did not feel they were being constantly watched by their neighbours. The perception of these women about the freedom of country living differs from the perception that city dwellers have about rural communities. It is not uncommon to hear rural areas described as places where people feel obligated to others and have less freedom to do what they want because everyone is watching their neighbours. It was interesting to observe that opinions differed according to the location and the life experiences of each person.

There are two different opinions that seem to contradict each other in this analysis. First, the older women living in rural settings described their environment as being more private than if they lived in a city. The notion of privacy, from their perspective, related to neighbours' houses being further apart compared to those found in cities. For the participants, privacy meant not being able to see inside the yard or the house next door;

likewise, living in rural communities signified not being constantly watched by others. Secondly, participants remarked that, in rural communities, people tend to know what is going on with their neighbours because “everybody knows everybody,” and it is easy to know when the people living next door are at home or not. This proximity was well described by participants when they talked about the support they received from their community. While the first example is about privacy, the second illustrates a lack of it (e.g., when they see the car arrive, they pop in to visit without asking).

The participants talked about community in two ways. They mentioned strong bonds between the inhabitants of living in a rural setting. At the same time, they described how the newcomers did not integrate themselves well into their new community. The women based their interpretations of the community on their past experiences. As indicated by Grenier and Brotman (2010), older women who live in these settings describe their environment according to what they used to experience in rural communities and what life was like at that period. Their social representations of their current daily life constitute a reference to the past.

The newcomers brought with them new habits and this changed the way the participants found support because they did not want to ask for help from strangers. These newcomers were seen as a threat to their support system within their community: participants feared that the community would not be the same with these new habits and ways of doing things. The women also added that they did not want to initiate contact with the newcomers since they did not know them. They do not wish to build relationships with them.

The women’s experience with newcomers stemmed from the social representation they had about these outsiders who brought with them new habits (Grenier & Brotman,

2010). The participants were attached to their community and they explained this based on their lived experience. For them, the old days in their rural communities were the best ones.

The women explained their concept of choice as deciding where to live at this point in their life. They had made a conscious choice to live in a rural setting. Understanding this choice was especially important when discussing rurality. Choice meant the participants could decide how long they would stay in their home and when they would leave. Strong attachments led them to stay where they currently lived. In this study, the concepts of freedom, peace and choice were tightly linked to rurality. The women used these terms to express their feelings and their perceptions of their communities. For them, living in a rural setting meant, first and foremost, being free and living in a peaceful environment. These were the reasons why these older women chose to remain in their home in a rural community.

The women explained that nowadays, older people have more options than in the past. For example, if they wanted to move somewhere else, they could. For now, however, the women want to stay in their home by choice. Any alternative should not be imposed upon them, because they recognized that it was their decision to live there. These women were very assertive when expressing this view. In addition, it was the mutual support they received that helped them to remain in a rural setting. For them, if peace, freedom, and choice were hallmarks of their life, they were partly due to the mutual support provided in this rural setting (Connors, Kennick & Bloch, 2013). Such support enriched the lives of these older women.

The findings of this study closely parallel the findings of other studies. Several authors who studied rurality and aging echo the desire of older people to remain in their

rural community (Chapman & Peace, 2008; Shenk, 1998b). Rurality was certainly important for the women in this study. It is not surprising that the literature regarding rural life has mostly focused on women, since statistics show that women make up a large percentage of the aging population in certain areas. Hence, there is a great need to continue to study this population, as underlined by the many authors cited in this study.

The women saw the issue of remaining in their home as a lifestyle choice despite the pressure they often experienced because they lived independently (Kinsel, 2005). Their lived experience was closely linked to the perceptions of the people in their surroundings regarding life in rural communities. The women defined their daily lives according to the comments made about them and acted in accordance with others' expectations of them (Mills, 1959). Therefore, the world that surrounded the older women had an impact on how they lived and responded to those criteria created by others about being an aging woman (Schütz, 1899-1959).

The participants fought the social pressure placed upon them due to images of frailty and isolation by consciously choosing to remain in their rural community and their home, rather than giving in to those who wanted them to live elsewhere. Despite the great changes observed by these women in their daily lives, they continued to believe in the importance of receiving the support of others to help them stay in their rural communities (Connors, Kennick & Bloch, 2013). They had faith in the people who lived near them despite the significant changes that were happening in rural areas. They were aware of these changes, yet still wanted to remain as long as they could.

New residents who settled in the community changed the old habits of support (Connors, Kennick & Bloch, 2013). Despite these changes, long-term residents continued to turn to the people they knew to maintain this familiarity (Connors, Kennick

& Bloch, 2013). Chapman and Peace (2008) noted a similar tendency in their study of rural settings. What worried the local population was not so much the lack of services in the community, but rather the new faces who were coming in and not socializing with the people in the community. In this study, the women reported feeling uncomfortable among the newcomers in the community because they were strangers. They only felt close to the people with whom they were familiar. The women were ready to welcome the newcomers if they took the necessary steps to get acquainted with their neighbours in the community. The lifelong residents waited for the newcomers to come forward and meet them. This was deemed their responsibility.

It is worth exploring further the reasons why newcomers settle in rural communities. In their study with newcomers who decided to move from the city to the country, Roy, Paquette and Domon (2005) found one of the reasons was to settle in a peaceful and quiet environment. The newcomers wanted to quit the city where they were too many people and where houses were close one to another. They sought tranquility and peace, stressing their need to be isolated to access this tranquility. It is interesting to note that both the newcomers and the longtime residents wanted the same thing, namely to live in a peaceful environment in a rural community.

Since rural communities are confronted with a decreasing population, it is crucial for longtime residents to take note of the reasons why newcomers do not adopt the same habits as they, such as socializing, volunteering or connecting with other members of the community. Newcomers, as noted by Roy, Paquette and Domon (2005), decide to leave the cities because of the large number of people and the proximity of houses to one another – they are looking for a quiet and peaceful setting. This is the reason why they choose to live in a rural area. While newcomers share a similar vision with regard to the

quality of life in rural communities as longtime residents, they do not have the same ways of doing things, and their habits trouble the longtime residents, according to the participants of this study.

The women did not need to know the new residents intimately, rather they simply wanted to know who they were to assess whether they could place their trust in them. Trust was vital for participants to build mutual support. This posed a problem since, according to Roy and al. (2005), newcomers escaped the city to be alone and peaceful and did not necessarily wish to socialize. If strangers to the community made no attempt to reach out to those who lived there already, this support was likely to deteriorate with the departure of longtime residents. These women wanted a community where people felt confident and safe with each other. Newcomers however, felt safe enough to trust their neighbours because that was one of the reasons they chose rural communities in the first place (Roy et al. 2005). Although newcomers trust their neighbours, as mentioned by Roy et al. (2005), most of the longtime residents do not fully trust the newcomers because they do not know who they are or where they come from. Longtime residents wish to know them, but to make this happen, the newcomers need to take the first steps to introduce themselves if they want to be included in the community. As Randall, Clews and Furlong (2015) explained, longtime residents' worries about newcomers regarding mutual support stem from having to change the "old ways" (p.131) of doing things.

Furthermore, the women explained that the informal support in their community tended to be less visible and was slowly eroding. As stated by Simard (2015), rural regions are facing a decline in population and some of the rural communities have a population of 500 or fewer inhabitants. Many of those communities are comprised of

older people. Unsurprisingly, the informal support system is decreasing. This trend observed by the participants regarding the lack of support could change if the longtime residents welcomed the newcomers. They would have to take the initiative to introduce themselves to the newcomers. This would be a new way to reinforce the support system in the community.

The newcomers in Roy et al. (2005) did not feel any urgency to introduce themselves. Thus, there appeared to be a clash between newcomers and longtime residents, each group having ways of doing things which were different from each other. The changes that occurred in rural communities with the arrival of the newcomers transformed the face of the rural communities. Rural regions, as stated by the participants, are experiencing major changes such as a reduction of services, a lack of apartments for their residents and even a lack of a transport system. The newcomers and longtime residents could develop an atmosphere of trust if they together created opportunities to get to know each other. With trust and dialogue, the informal support system might be reinforced so that this support does not disappear.

6.1.1 Contradictions in the Narratives of the Participants Raising Issues With Regard to Services

The women in the study described the life of their communities as being centred around church activities, school or recreational clubs. They and all members of their community had, in the past, expected and received services for their community. In order to convey the beauty of their community, they now spoke of it in the past tense, aware that the population has greatly declined, but they wanted governments to hear them and invest in both rural and urban areas. That is why they felt more left out and abandoned by governments than by the members of the community.

Moreover, the participants were the first to witness major changes in their areas. The majority explained that, when they talk about the need for services, it is not just for themselves, because they are mostly older people, but it is so that their community does not disappear with the passing of its aging residents.

On the one hand, they need services to stay in place as long as possible; and on the other hand, they are so attached to all the hard work that they and other older people have done to develop these communities that they remain convinced that these are the best places for a person to grow old (Keating, Eales & Phillips, 2013; Shenk, 1998b).

Again, when policy makers target the health services, it is with regard to what would be the most efficient and least costly for delivering those services. Within urban settings, more often than not, the emphasis is on how to implement those services and make them more accessible. In rural areas, according to Brassolotto et al. (2019), the stress is more on informal support, the long distances to access services or the limited number of nursing homes, as well as on the difficulties the people in rural regions experience in benefiting from and having access to those services that are located in cities. This is closely linked to what the older women in this study mentioned about the lack of interest in implementing services close to their rural regions. Most of the time, rural settings are analyzed under a negative lens in terms of formal services. These inequalities stem from the fact that urban areas are favoured over rural areas (Fecht, Jones, Hill, Lindfield, Thomson, Hansell & Shukla, 2017). Older people are therefore penalized for remaining in their rural communities.

Aging in place and rurality are at the intersection with older women who live in rural regions. They have to negotiate their daily life, not only to be respected for their decision to remain in those places, but also with regard to what they need in order to

remain there. Those negotiations, as explained by Skinner and Winterton (2017), include resources and services that will help them to keep on living in those places. It is important to take into account the intersection of age, place, and rurality because individuals express their needs and their wish to remain in their own home as older persons, although, they constantly have to negotiate (Skinner & Winterton, 2017), to express their needs (Brassolot et al., 2019) and to demonstrate (Dalmer, 2019) that it is where they belong for now as older women. To remain in place, particularly in rural settings, older people need help, services and support (McDonough & Davitt, 2011). If the voice of those older women can be heard regarding what they need in order to stay in their own home, rural settings will gain from having inhabitants who care about their rural communities and want to do everything they can to contribute to those communities. One of the contributions is to stay where they want to be.

6.2 Underground Support

Living in a rural setting was feasible for the older women in the study because of the mutual support received and given. This long tradition of helping each other in rural communities has been developed and maintained thanks to the proximity of the inhabitants and the closeness of their relationships. As longtime residents, they received help because the people in their community knew them well (Chapman & Peace, 2008). Many of the participants in this study had lived in their community since they were born. Because of this, they experienced a deep sense of familiarity. This familiarity provided security: they felt safe and confident about asking for help as well as offering it. This mutual support allows many people to stay in their communities longer (Chapman & Peace, 2008). Support for these women was a vital part of people's lives. The support

made it possible to create ties in the good and the bad times of daily life. All these gestures encourage people to remain in their environment.

Longstanding habits and practices are changing with the declining number of people who live in rural settings and the arrival of newcomers. A few participants explained how life has changed in their community. Some women talked about the fact that people visit each other less. For example, they were used to visiting a neighbour to have a chat and a coffee – this is now a thing of the past. New habits are changing their lived experience. As Keating and Phillips (2008) demonstrated, despite major changes, older people hang onto an idyllic image of their rural environment. This picture comes from how things were done in the old days when rural communities were composed of large families with a lot of children.

The participants explained that their communities were composed of Acadians whose ancestors settled the region and the language spoken was, and still is, French. These older women were proud of saying that they were Acadians and spoke French. Since the newcomers did not speak French, they saw this as a barrier to building relationships with them. All these changes in the community made them think and feel nostalgic about the old days.

When the time comes to offer support in any form, a familiar face instills a sense of trust and security for the person receiving the service (Keating, Eales & Phillips, 2013; Glass & Vander Plaats, 2013). In this study, familiarity was also important for the women who lived alone. This familiarity went beyond giving or receiving a service; it also fostered a feeling of closeness with their environment whether at the grocery store, at church, or simply sitting on the front steps of their house when people drove by honking their horns and waving “hello”.

Some studies have attempted to define informal support and analyze it as a type of service that is quantifiable. For example, certain researchers identified informal help as offering meals, shopping or driving others to their appointments without receiving anything in return (Keating, Eales & Phillips, 2013). Mutual support between older people and individuals in their community was also referred to by Chapman and Peace (2008) and reported by Keating, Eales, and Phillips (2013). It was therefore important to explore support in terms of formal services, but also with regard to the day-to-day actions that people appreciated from those familiar to them. For example, gestures that invited mutual support, such as a smile or a simple “hello” were also examined. I chose to name this mutual support *underground support*, support that was present but not easily visible.

The term *underground* was appropriate in this context, as it describes a type of support that is received and given but that no one else knows exists. This type of support tends to be overlooked even in qualitative studies. However, in this study, it took centre stage. This support gave the participants a sense of belonging: they always knew someone cared for them. They knew they could count on others. A simple smile, a “hello”, a honk of a horn, a phone call—all were gestures of support that brought comfort and security to these women. These gestures had great meaning in their lives. The women expressed their appreciation for these actions and for the fact they could rely on others when needed.

These countless gestures were important for the participants because their rural way of life was undergoing major changes with many newcomers arriving and bringing different ways of doing things. The underground support positively transformed the lives of these women who had always lived in a rural setting.

6.2.1 Staying Home: Being Independent and Being Part of Their Community

These older women, who live in rural areas and who describe themselves as independent, demonstrate that they participate actively in their community. The last thing they want is to be seen and treated as an elderly person who, without others, would no longer be able to remain independent (Petry, 2003). They accept and are happy to receive support from others, but most of all, through very simple gestures to help others, they affirm their independence and their desire to be seen and described that way. Even though these women say they are happy to receive support, this does not mean that they want to be viewed as unproductive members of their community. They feel the weight of the years on their shoulders and all the burdens they must manage, whether taking care of the house, living with family members or having to do without services that no longer exist in the community. Despite this weight, they want to feel like they are contributing to their community. Sadly, these women are too often described as no longer contributing to society and therefore no longer engaged and productive (Clark, 2011; Higgs & Gilleard, 2014).

Despite the fact that they are able to remain in their community thanks to the support of others, they want to be seen by those same people as older women who contribute to this community life, whether by keeping an eye on someone else's home in their absence or by giving them home-cooked food. By doing so, they gain a sense of recognition for their contribution when they help others. They also feel there is a quality of life that marks their existence (Ryser & Halseth, 2011), because these mutual gestures bring them happiness and satisfaction.

Not surprisingly, these women explain that others should respect their choice to stay where they are now. They know that the time will come when they are no longer

able to remain at home, and they will have to face the decision to leave. For now, their home and their rural community are what bring them the most happiness. In this context, feeling independent does not mean refusing help or support. Rather, it is about deciding what support they will need, how much help they will receive, and who will provide that help.

As Zielinski (2009) pointed out, when we allow people to decide what kind of help they will receive or what kind of help they want, the people who provide that help and those receiving it enter into a relationship with each other. This relationship, therefore, allows them to get to know the helper and to express their wishes and desires.

However, to express this choice, they also require formal services from the government, whether financial or home-based, in order to be less of a burden on their families. They highlight how rural communities are forgotten by the government, resulting in older their being frequently pressured to leave their region and their homes. This takes away their ability to have choices and make decisions for themselves.

6.3 Summary of the Chapter

This study shares similarities with other studies on aging, but there are also differences. One of the similarities has to do with the notion of home. The participants declared without hesitation that their house was an extension of their identity and sense of self. They described themselves by means of their home, and their self-perceptions were expressed through it. The house represented what they had achieved in their lifetime. Many studies have demonstrated that the significance of women's work in the domestic sphere is generally overlooked. For these women, the only way they could explain to others what they had accomplished in life was by talking about their home. Everything they had achieved could be found there. Other studies have come to a similar

conclusion: the home, for most older women of this generation, was at the heart of their daily life. This was the reason why they wanted to stay there as long as they could.

The women also wished to remain in their home without the pressure to live elsewhere. Despite feeling good about staying, the women heard many negative comments. Some studies have demonstrated the impact on older women of living constantly with ageism and sexism in their daily life. In this study, it was possible to clarify the combined impacts of ageism and sexism on the women in relation to their home and others' perceptions about them, especially when their house was not well maintained. The women were seen as frail, isolated and to be pitied, and they knew it.

Even though these women did live alone, they felt stronger and more independent than men of the same age. They attributed these qualities to the domestic sphere they had had to occupy from a very young age. As previously mentioned, studies have recognized that this work remained invisible. However, few studies have explored the fact that this work allowed the women to remain autonomous with the moral strength to live alone.

The participants attributed this strength to the fact that they were more sociable and therefore more likely to reach out to others than men. Several studies have also shown that older women have an important social network and informal support systems, due in part to their extensive volunteer work. Such work enabled older women to build a sizeable informal support network.

This study also revealed that, in rural areas, there was also another form of support that often went unnoticed: underground support. This form of support often exists in rural areas between members of a community. Finally, several studies on older people

have shown that rural areas are places where there is a good quality of life; this is the reason why residents want to remain there as long as possible.

This study presented an account of the reality of older women in rural areas, revealing new elements that have not yet been addressed in the literature. In the following chapter, I will discuss the implications for research and practice. First, language and culture were not central features of the interviews, nor was formal support. However, informal and underground forms of support were at the forefront of participants' experiences. Furthermore, the domestic sphere had a great influence on their daily life. According to the women, their lifelong experience in domestic work and taking care of their families constituted the main reason why they could live by themselves to this day.

CHAPTER 7: IMPLICATIONS

This research explored the lived experiences of older women living in rural communities. The participants spoke extensively about the meaning of their lives. Their lived experiences contained elements that have implications for future research and current practice. Being surrounded by their language and culture was important to the support they found in their environment and their ability to remain at home. The domestic work contributed to who they were today and how they went about their lives. There are also important implications for practice as the aging population is increasing in numbers. These elements will be discussed in this chapter.

7.1 Research Implications

This study has prompted a reflection on the implications for research. It goes without saying that qualitative research with older Francophone women must continue because this study is only the beginning and the participants clearly expressed the view that they are too often not listened to and heard. There are implications for future research in this area.

7.1.1 Being Surrounded by One's Language and Culture

Issues of language and culture did not occupy an important place in the interviews. It was interesting to note that because the participants lived most of their daily life in French and were surrounded by their culture, these topics were not a major concern for them. Nonetheless, it was important for them to live in communities where French was the first language spoken. They did not have to think about speaking another language in their everyday life, nor did they have to be concerned about conversing in a language in which they did not feel comfortable. Being immersed in their language and culture made them feel at home and proud of who they were as Acadian women. The participants

were proud to say that their communities had been settled by their Acadian ancestors and, in turn, they had made sure to pass their language and culture on to their children.

Language barriers also prevented some of the women from meeting the newcomers in their community. They tended to avoid others, not because they were not interested in getting to know them, but because they felt ashamed of not being able to express themselves well in another language. It would be relevant to do further research to explore the extent to which language is in fact a barrier, and if it is what makes the participants turn only toward those they know best to seek support. Is language the major obstacle?

7.1.2 Informal or Underground Support

Qualitative studies have looked at the concept of formal and informal support. While the participants in this study did not give a name to the informal support, I used the term *underground* in part because the women gave examples of the support of members in their communities which were almost invisible and would likely be missed by outside researchers. This type of informal support has not yet been recognized in other studies but was described by participants as something that helped them to feel good about remaining in their home. This support consisted of a smile, a “hello”, a phone call, the horn of a car passing by or a quick chat with people who passed by when they were outside the house. These gestures were perhaps not visible to other community members, but they made the women feel at home and quietly appreciated, nonetheless. This was the reason I felt underground support was an appropriate term.

7.1.3 The Domestic Sphere and its Implications for Older Women Living Independently

Another compelling observation during the study was the fact that most of the participants were convinced that the work they had done in the domestic sphere had positively contributed to their ability to live by themselves.

This housework has been studied extensively and has been used to denounce the form of patriarchy women experienced because they were women. The social demands that placed them in the domestic sphere made their contribution to society invisible and with limited apparent value. This was particularly true for today's older women who lived in an era when they were told to stay at home and take care of it.

During the interviews, domestic labour was discussed in terms of its powerful influence on today's older women, who perceived their work in the domestic sphere as being the main reason why they could live by themselves more easily than aged men. This is an important aspect to consider because the participants interpreted their past work as having had a positive impact on their ability to live alone.

This study revealed another side of the work in the domestic sphere. The participants went through hardships and faced the challenges of raising a large family with few commodities. They took care of sick parents and children. They buried children; some buried grandchildren. Some of them experienced grief and health complications. Perhaps as a result, today they feel as if they possess the ability to overcome any hardship they may experience as an older woman.

In their study of older urban women who had spent their lives in poverty, authors Black and Rubinstein (2000) revealed that some older women had experienced and overcome difficulties even at an early stage of their adult life because of their gender,

including, taking care of their younger brothers and sisters. The authors claimed that all these experiences contributed to the women's being able to take care of themselves. They were able to recall everything they had overcome and use the abilities gained to face hard times as an older woman living independently. Their work in the domestic sphere helped them to see themselves as capable and strong enough to live by themselves in their home.

7.2 Implications for Future Research

What the participants shared increased our knowledge about the lived experience of older women living by themselves. However, there is still more research to be done in this field.

There is still a need for more research on Acadian, Francophone older women and to learn how newcomers in rural settings experience being new members of a rural, Francophone community. How do they experience being welcomed (or not) in these communities by the longtime residents? To what extent is language a barrier between newcomers and longtime residents, preventing them from getting to know each other in rural communities? Can this situation influence how they will interact with and help each other?

Several concepts emerged from this study that have not been highlighted in previous studies. The participants clearly identified important factors contributing to their decision to remain in their community. It would be important for the field of aging to understand more deeply the nature of the underground support. It was evident that the participants in this study relied on such support to help them feel that they were not alone and were important members of the community. This is an emerging dimension which needs to be problematized to better understand how this type of support is present

within the community. Such knowledge could then be transmitted to university students to better prepare practitioners in the helping professions. Hopefully, this study may serve to spur other research to learn more about this informal support in other settings.

This research not only gave a voice to women, but it also allowed them to be heard. Instead of only looking at what was wrong with their daily life and their community, the research wanted to give them the space they needed to analyze and interpret their own experience. It will be very interesting in future research to use the strength-based approach with Acadian, Francophone older women who live in rural regions. The main reason is that this will give them ample room to express what they need to remain in place.

One way of approaching the participants included in this method is to “listen respectfully to the person” (Gibson, Crockett, Dudgeon, Bernoth & Lincoln, 2020). This approach in future research will without a doubt be of benefit, not only to the research field but most of all to the people who participate in the qualitative studies.

During this research, the participants had room to express their feelings toward others who do not respect or listen to them and most of all to their needs. The strength-based approach will definitively be an approach that will give them the space they need to talk and to criticize the system if they wish to. For too long -- and all the participants mentioned it -- older people have felt they are not worthy to be listened to or even to express themselves. This method will give them that space they need.

Again, this approach permits the researcher to delve into the strengths of older people (Janssen, Regenmortel & Abma, 2011). It will surely demonstrate the ability they have to refute all the comments or even all the suggestions older people constantly receive from others that they should leave their home because they are seen as a frail

older women who should not stay by themselves. This approach will give another side of their lived experience. It will give them the opportunity to see themselves capable of staying where they are for now.

7.3 Practice Implications

This section presents the implication of the results of this study for practice. One main topic concerns the deconstruction of negative images about older people because it influences the younger generation in ways that create barriers to working with older people. Young professionals often lack interest in working with an older population. Either the social or the political discourses on aging (or perhaps both) directly impact these professionals. It is necessary to deconstruct negative images and perceptions of older people to change the generations to come and how they can work with older people.

A better understanding of the long-term effects of these negative descriptions of older people will allow practitioners to intervene with more positive preconceptions. I have heard many students at the bachelor's level in schools of social work where I teach state that they are not comfortable working with an aging population. They say that they do not want to give baths, change diapers or talk with someone who has dementia. These students already have an image that all older people are the same: frail and cognitively impaired. There is work to be done to deconstruct the negative perceptions of the aging population, as social and political discourses and policies continue to encourage a negative image about older people as being a burden on society and draining public funds.

Further qualitative research in the field of aging will help to enrich policies and practice intervention. Too often, as indicated by Stoppard and McMullen (2003), research can be harmful if studies do not take into consideration the voice of the people concerned with the subject of the study. More qualitative research on aging that considers the voices of older people themselves, particularly in rural areas, will lead to better practices. For instance, this study revealed the importance, for aging individuals, to remain in their rural communities. Therefore, it is incumbent on the leaders of those communities to invest in services that will improve the daily life of their aging population. With that knowledge in mind, community leaders such as mayors and their councils can meet the needs of an important group in society. Giving voice to these people will only improve their daily life and the community life of all rural regions.

7.4 Limitations

As may be anticipated, there are limitations to this research. First, in choosing to study the Acadian, Francophone population, I expected to delve more into culture and language. However, I quickly realized that because my initial question aimed to explore the experiences of these women, they answered my question without covering language and culture. This can be explained by the fact that they lived in a region with a strong Acadian, Francophone majority, so it was not important for them to mention language and culture. Had I chosen to speak with Acadian, Francophone women living in a region with a high concentration of English speakers, perhaps that aspect would have been raised during the interviews. Even though I knew that I had chosen regions where French was the primary language spoken, I did not expect that this would not be an issue for them. By choosing phenomenology, I came to understand that language was not a concern for these women. In addition, it would have been interesting to learn from the

newcomers moving to rural regions whether they felt welcomed as new members of the community. Future research should address what municipalities can do for older women. The women addressed this, but the question could have been formulated differently to explore in greater detail this aspect of their daily life.

Another limitation was that the choice to study older women by starting with those aged 75 years brought its own challenges. It became clear during the interviews with the participants that the age range was too wide. The women aged 75 to 79 years did not have the same lived experience as those who were 80 years old and beyond. For example, in the field of education, the experience of the younger women was quite different from that of the older participants. The women in the former group had free education right through high school while for those in the latter group education through to grade 12 was a privilege. For the participants aged 80 and over, education was free only up to grade 8; after that they could only attend school if their parents could afford to pay tuition fees. Thus, there was a large gap between the educational experiences of the two groups of participants. Their lived experience would be very different because of their age.

Another limitation also concerns the comparative ages of the participants. The women in their mid to late seventies were more mobile as they were still driving and they also had fewer physical limitations. During the interviews, it became clear that, for them, living in rural settings did not feel restricting because they could count on their cars to get access to what they wanted. In contrast, the participants aged 85 and older did not have the same possibilities. Some were not driving any more and a few had poor vision and difficulty walking. Again, these factors add a different interpretation of their daily life.

CONCLUSION

There are many layers of stigmatization which contribute to maintaining a whole set of stereotypes against older women who decide to live alone in rural settings. This stigmatization stems from their owning an old house, possessing antique furniture, living alone, having a limited social life, and not having a car to go wherever they want. Society reinforces stereotypes about older women who do not fit the established norms. Because women are older, they are not considered fit enough to stay by themselves. Some expressions and words used by others depicted rural older women as frail and pitiful: “Aren’t you tired of being alone?” and “When are you going to leave this old house?” These powerful words served as a reminder of how frail they appear because of how and where they live. However, these women were not afraid to take a stand and express their sense of belonging to the community and their ownership of their daily lives. They were not afraid to openly say how good they feel about their home and possessions; how happy they are to live in a rural region.

My research with older women stemmed from the fact that I had a desire to learn and understand the daily lives of women aged 75 and over. This study allowed me to achieve my goals by means of a phenomenological approach. This methodology was instrumental in highlighting the meaning that women gave their lived experiences, partly because of the hermeneutic approach. At the outset of this research, I wanted to ensure that the women would be comfortable talking about their lives. The hermeneutic approach I adopted was one where my epistemological stance consisted of not suspending or putting in brackets my own knowledge of aging and rurality, as elucidated by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Phenomenology gave the women the room to

interpret their life experiences, as demonstrated by their comments after receiving the transcription. The following are some of their expressions of appreciation: “Thank you so much, I cannot believe I have so many qualities.” “I cried when I read the transcription. It is the best gift I had. I was going to send you a thank you card.” “How can I thank you for that gift?”

In addition, this research was about understanding the meaning given by various authors when they elaborate on the social construction of aging (Clarke, 2011; Grenier & Hanley, 2007; Morganroth Gullette, 2004). Therefore, it was important to understand the concept of social construction, especially the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966). It helped to enrich my knowledge of the subject and to explore how the participants lived with definitions of others that framed their daily lives. The concept of ageism elaborated by Butler (1969) also contributed to linking ageism and sexism to understand the lived experiences of these women. These two dimensions were observed in the lives of the older women and, in this study, explained how the social construction of their reality was based on the categories of gender, age and rurality.

Furthermore, this research created a space for women to express their perceptions and the meaning they gave to their lived experiences. I sought to understand their experiences and to allow them to present an account of their reality. Not only did the phenomenological approach help to achieve these goals, but qualitative studies served as a guide for my own research. For instance, Gubrium’s (1993) study in a nursing home used a qualitative approach which revealed how the voice of older people was too often forgotten in times of decision-making concerning services or choices directly affecting them. The participants’ comments in this study were helpful to ensure their involvement. This was an example of the ways in which qualitative research forged a path for this

study. The findings of Keating (2008), who studied rural settings, also allowed an understanding that older people form a large portion of the population in New Brunswick. Other studies further illustrated the diversity among rural communities and helped to demonstrate that each rural community is different. Some studies, using a feminist approach, elaborated on the main concepts important to the lived experiences of older women, such as gender or domestic labour (Browne, 1998; Calasanti & Slevin, 2006; Clarke, 2011; Furman, 1997). All these authors have contributed to a better understanding of the lived experiences of older women who live in French-speaking rural areas in New Brunswick.

This research gave a voice to rural older women, who explained how important invisible support is in their daily lives. This study also highlighted that this form of support has not been studied very much. In addition, another contribution of this research is the deep desire these women have to remain in rural areas, despite the contradictions they raised throughout the interviews. These older women know that rural areas are currently undergoing significant changes, but they continually state loudly and clearly that they want to stay there for as long as they wish. They defend their lives. This study will allow for further research and its implications. There is still much to learn about rural areas and their inhabitants, the newcomers and the long-time residents, and as much about support for each other.

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Appendix A

Publicity

I am a student enrolled in PhD level at the University of New Brunswick, I am an Acadian and I am interested in the field of aging. My field of study is aging women 75 years and older who lived independently in their rural community. I would like to better understanding the daily life of aging women, the perceptions and life experience about living in rural francophone regions. If you are interested in participating, I can be reached at 532-6107 or 858-4190.

Thank you very much.

Elda Savoie

Appendix B

Interview Guide

To begin

tell me about yourself

Herself

Where were you born?

When were you born?

How long have you been living in this rural community?

Do you live alone? Since when?

Her family

How many children do you have?

Do they live close to you?

Her as a aging woman living in rural settings

How would you describe your life today?

How would you describe living as an aging woman in rural settings today?

What are the elements help you to remain in your home as an aging woman?

Her rural community – tell me about your community

How would you define rurality?

How long have you been living in this community?

How do you find your community? What's your community like?

How would you describe your community life?

What's the best thing about living here?

What the worst thing about living here?

Tell me about a typical day?

Did you choose to stay in your community?

What make you to stay in your rural community?

Are you in church or other organizations?

If there are any particular challenges living in a rural area?

Appendix C

Guide d'entretien

À propos d'elle

Vous êtes née à quel endroit ?

En quelle année êtes-vous née?

Depuis quand habitez-vous dans cette communauté ?

Est-ce que vous habitez seule? Depuis quand ?

À propos de sa famille

Avez-vous des enfants ? Si oui combien?

Est-ce qu'ils habitent près de vous?

À propos d'elle comme femme âgée habitant le milieu rural

Parlez moi un peu de votre vie maintenant ici dans votre communauté

Parlez-moi un peu de votre vie aujourd'hui?

Comment se vit le quotidien d'une femme âgée de 75 ans et plus aujourd'hui qui habite en région rurale ?

Quels sont les éléments qui vous aident à demeurer ici ?

Sa communauté rurale

Comment trouvez-vous votre communauté?

Parlez moi un peu de votre vie communautaire?

Quels sont les bons côtés à propos de vivre ici?

Quels sont les moins bons côtés?

Avez-vous choisi de vivre ici?

Qu'est-ce qui fait en sorte que vous pouvez demeurer ici ?

Appendix D

Explanatory Letter

Hello,

It is my pleasure to introduce myself, I am a student enrolled in doctoral studies at the University of New Brunswick. I teach at the School of Social Work at the University of Moncton and I decided to continue my studies at the doctoral level. My field of teaching and research, among other, is aging.

I am particularly interested in aging in rural francophone in New Brunswick. I am interested in understanding the experiences of older people who live in our rural areas. I chose to focus on older women I want my doctoral studies to teach me and guide me to better understand the lives of older people.

To achieve this learning through my studies, I have chosen to talk to aging Francophone and Acadian women living in rural communities. The interview will be a one-on-one meeting between you and me. The meeting will last about two hours and I will ask you questions about your life and your perceptions of life in francophone rural areas as an aging person.

Our conversation will be recorded and I will take notes of our conversation. All this information will be kept confidential and no names and no region will be appointed to maintain confidentiality and respect your identity and our discussion. You also free to refuse to answers any questions. No questions are mandatory. It is your choice to answer or not.

This conversation between you and me will enrich and especially help to put on paper the experiences of older people living in rural New Brunswick. All this is written in my thesis.

I am very grateful for allowing me to share your experiences, your life as an aging person.

Thank you very much

Elda Savoie
PhD Student

Contact numbers : elda.savoie@umoncton.ca or 858-4190

Appendix E

CONSENT AGREEMENT

Hereby I, _____, agree to participate in a personal interview to be held on _____. This interview is organized in the framework of doctoral studies at the University of New Brunswick. The PhD student is registered for interdisciplinary programs at the same university. I am aware that I can refuse at any time during the interview to withdraw or not answering a question. It is my right to stop the interview without consequences.

Any information that will be collected during the interview will be used to write the doctoral thesis of the student. The objective of this activity is to identify the elements that contribute to maintaining a quality of life of francophones aging women in rural New Brunswick who live independently.

All information will be kept confidential. No names will be disclosed and any personal information that can identify individual situations or people are mentioned. The discussion will be recorded but only for purposes of information that will be used to produce the doctoral thesis. When the work is finished recording will be kept in a safe and locked place for a period of five years. Participants are free to withdraw from the interview at any time during the meeting.

In the event that during the meeting, there was mention of elder abuse or other forms of negligence, the student will take the necessary measures to ensure the protection of participants. It will provide the phone number Emergency Department of Social Development and the organization of Family Services that provides support and listening.

Emergency Numbers

Ministry of Social Development (protection of seniors): 1-866-426-5191; Mental Health Centre : 523-7620; Centre de Kent pour la prévention de la violence familiale 743-5449.

Ethical Concerns

If you have any ethical concerns or wish to make a complaint, you may contact the office of the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of New Brunswick Dr Linda Eyres, Dean SGS (Sir Howard Douglas, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB). Tel: 453-4673.

I understand the information on this research project, I understand that I may ask questions in the future and I can terminate my participation without having to justify myself in any way whatsoever. Hereby, I freely consent to participate in this research project according to the conditions just listed above:

Signature of Participant : _____

I certify that I have explained the terms to the signatory of this form, objectives and implications of the research project, have clear answers to her questions and have indicated that it is free at any time to terminate its participation in the project research describes and without justification and without prejudice.

Signature of the interviewer (Elda Savoie)

Date

Appendix F

Transcriber Confidentiality

Statement of Confidentiality for Transcriber

I _____ (Print Name) will transcribe recorded interviews for Elda Savoie, a student at the PhD level at UNB, who is conducting a study on Francophone Women aged 75 years and older.

The issues of confidentiality have been explained to me. By signing this form, I agree to maintain the privacy of participants whose information I am transcribing. This means that I will never divulge any information about the content of tapes I am transcribing or show the content of transcripts to a third party. I will never divulge any information including anything that might identify the research participant?

Elda Savoie is the only person I will have any conversation regarding the content of the transcriptions.

By signing this statement, I also agree to keep tapes, transcripts in my possession while I am transcribing in a locked and secure location. When I have finished my work, I will return ALL copies of tapes and transcripts to Elda Savoie. I will also erase all documents stored in computer files.

SIGNATURE OF TRANSCRIBER

Name of transcriber

Signature of transcriber

Date

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER

Name of student researcher

Signature of student researcher

Date

Appendix G

List of Professionals Help and Ethical Issues

Emergency Numbers

Ministry of Social Development (protection of seniors): 1-866-426-5191

Mental Health Centre : 523-7620.

Centre de Kent pour la prevention de la violence familiale : 743-5449

Ethical Concerns

If you have any ethical concerns or wish to make a complaint, you may contact the office of the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of New Brunswick Dr Linda Eyres, Dean SGS (Sir Howard Douglas, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB). Tel: 453-4673.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Candidate's full name:

Elda Savoie

Universities attended:

BSW, Université de Moncton, 1987

MSW, University of Ottawa, 1999

Publications:

Articles

Lanteigne, I., Rivest, M.-P., **Savoie, E.**, & Savoie, L. (2021, accepted). Creating Spaces of Courage and Hope: Cultivating the Seeds of Social Justice, *Journal of Social Work Education*

Savoie, E., Corriveau, H., Lanteigne, I., Savoie, L., & Albert, H. (2021, submitted). Reconnaissance du travail des proches aidantes en contexte francophone minoritaire : l'expérience des Fransaskoises, *Reflets*.

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Chapter

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2019 - Savoie, E. (2019). *L'identité des personnes âgées qui se forment par l'entremise de leur ruralité*, communication orale présentée dans le cadre du congrès national de l'association canadienne de gérontologie, octobre 2019, Moncton, N.-B.

2018- Mercure, D., Alper, D., Mayer, J. **avec la collaboration d'Elda Savoie (2018).** *La vitalité des solidarités dans les communautés francophones vivant en contexte linguistique et culturel minoritaire au Canada* communication orale présentée dans le cadre du colloque de l'Association canadienne de formation en travail social. Regina (Sask).

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2017- Savoie, E. & Caron, M-L. (juin, 2017). *Quand la justice sociale, valeur primée en travail social, traverse la formation académique et pratique.* Communication présentée dans le cadre du colloque des sciences humaines et sociales lors de la conférence de l'Association canadienne de formation en travail social, Toronto : Ont.

2016- Savoie, E. (Juin, 2016). *À titre de chercheur et d'intervenant social quelles leçons pouvons-nous tirer de l'expérience des femmes acadiennes et francophones qui vivent leur grand âge en région rurale ?* Communication orale présentée au Colloque des sciences humaines et sociales dans le cadre de la conférence de l'Association canadienne de formation en travail social, Calgary : Alberta

2016 -Savoie, E. (octobre, 2016). *L'expérience sociale de vieillir en région rurale francophone au Nouveau-Brunswick.* Affiche présentée dans le cadre du colloque national de l'Association canadienne de gérontologie, Montréal : Qué.

2015 -Savoie, E. (juin. 2015). *Vivre son grand âge et demeurer en région rurale francophone – devons-nous y voir un parallèle avec la notion de marginalisation ?* Communication présentée dans le cadre de la conférence nationale de l'Association canadienne de formation en travail social (ACFTS) qui s'est tenue dans le cadre du colloque de l'Association des sciences humaines et sociales, Ottawa : Ont.